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She lowered herself hand over hand.

"Mystery of the Laughing Mask" (See Page 184)

Mystery of the Laughing Mask

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

PENNY PARKER MYSTERY STORIES
TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

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MYSTERY OF THE LAUGHING MASK

CHAPTER I

A SILVER PIN

"MR. ALLAN, there's *one* thing I like about being your part-time secretary," remarked Gail Landreth from the bow of the cypress canoe.

Henry Allan, middle-aged, his wrinkled face burned from the blazing Florida sun, smiled at the girl as he poled the awkward craft into the swift current of the stream.

"All right, I'll bite," he chuckled. "What is that reason, Gail?"

"The salary!"

"So you don't like these little trips into the Everglades?" the naturalist asked teasingly. "Why, I am surprised at you, Gail. Haven't you always said you were waiting for a big adventure to come your way?"

"Adventure, yes," she sighed, wriggling her pug nose in distaste. "But today I've had almost too large a dose of heat, insects, saw grass and snakes."

"Ah, snakes," nodded Mr. Allan, appreciatively. "I'm glad you reminded me. Les Haskins was say-

ing he had killed a large one along here several months ago. He believes it may be a rare specimen, although I am inclined to disagree. We should be drawing near the place."

The naturalist began to scan the shore which was lined almost solidly with trees. Tropical vines hung low over the water and foliage formed an archway obscuring the sunlight.

By this time the canoe had reached the edge of the Everglades. Behind them lay a seemingly pathless tangle of grass through which the craft had struggled for the past six hours. Ahead stretched open water.

"Well, this looks as if it might be the place Haskins described," Mr. Allan remarked as they drifted near shore. "There's the log and the cabbage palm he mentioned. Suppose we see what we can find."

Bringing the canoe close in, he helped Gail step out on the soggy ground. Gratefully, she stretched her cramped limbs and breathed deeply. The air had an earthy, moist odor.

The naturalist searched near the old log, carefully raising decayed leaves and looking beneath them. Suddenly he gave a low cry.

"Here it is!"

Gail hastened to his side. Mr. Allan had uncovered a long section of vertebra, obviously that of a large snake. Carefully he picked up a bit of the jawbone.

"See that fang?" he queried triumphantly. "Now doesn't that suggest a rattler?"

"It suggests to me that I would rather be in another place," said Gail with a shiver. "Wonder if that old snake had any pals who live around here?"

The naturalist chuckled as he gathered up the bones in a tin pail. "Shouldn't be surprised. Better be careful where you step."

Even the thought of a snake was enough to send a shudder down Gail's spine, and the possibility of stepping on one made her doubly cautious. Inspecting every inch of the ground, she gingerly retreated.

Gail made a pretty picture as she sat in the canoe, awaiting the naturalist. She was just sixteen, dark-haired, brown-eyed, an honor student at Cordell High School. For twenty years her family had known Henry Allan, and the girl regarded him more as a kindly uncle than an actual employer.

So secure was her job that she never hesitated to speak her mind when the spirit moved her, knowing her remarks would be received in the vein intended. While her usual work consisted of taking shorthand and typewriting, Mr. Allan occasionally allowed her to accompany him upon his field trips.

Soon the naturalist returned and they started down the river again. Ere long the swift current brought them to an old dock where a number of boats and canoes were tied.

"Let's stop here at the Trading Post for a minute and talk with Les Haskins," proposed Mr. Allan. "Then I promise we'll call it a day and start for home."

As Gail and her employer stepped ashore, several Seminole Indians watched them stoically, their shy children taking refuge behind the palmetto shacks. A squaw in ankle-length blue calico, held out beaded belts and bags for sale, muttering when the pair did not buy.

Disregarding the Indians, Mr. Allan led the way to the Trading Post. He had walked only a short distance from the river when abruptly he paused. His attention had been drawn to a small object lying half-hidden beneath a broken bush.

"Here's something," he commented, stooping to pick it up.

"What have you found now, Mr. Allan? More snake bones?"

The naturalist did not reply. Moving closer, Gail saw that in his hand he held a tiny silver pin. It was encrusted with dirt and still fastened to a torn piece of grayish cloth.

"Well, this is an odd trinket," he remarked, cleaning away the dirt with his handkerchief. "Notice the design."

The pin was shaped in the form of a grotesque grinning face. While the design seemed strangely

familiar to Gail, she could not immediately recall where she had seen it.

"What would you say it represents, Mr. Allan?" she asked.

"I wonder myself, Gail. Of course, the laughing face is the conventional Greek Comedy mask. One often sees it used as a decoration on theatre programs."

"Oh, yes, now I remember! I knew it was familiar. How strange to use the design for a pin!"

"The really strange part is to find it here at the edge of the Everglades."

"Could it be an Indian pin, Mr. Allan?"

"I think not, Gail. The Seminoles do a little work with silver, but nothing of this nature. An outsider must have lost it here."

"Yet, not many persons venture this far up the river."

"Only a few sportsmen and half-crazed naturalists such as myself," chuckled Mr. Allan.

"Not to mention crack-brained secretaries," added Gail, laughing. "Anyway, it's a real pretty pin."

Mr. Allan dropped the trinket into her hand. "It's yours, unless we find the owner, which isn't likely. However, we might ask Haskins if any visitors have called at the Post during the last few weeks. The pin hasn't been here long."

"I hope no one claims it," Gail said, studying the trinket with appreciation. "This will set off my new blue dress beautifully—the one I'm going to buy with next week's salary!"

Unfastening the piece of soiled cloth from the clasp, she turned the pin over in her hand. On the reverse side was engraved the number "12."

"Now I wonder what significance that has?" she mused aloud.

Mr. Allan did not hear for, promptly dismissing the matter, he had walked on toward the Trading Post. Gail quickly fastened the pin to the front of her blouse and overtook him.

A group of Indians, bare-headed, bare-legged, stood on the sagging wooden porch, staring at the newcomers with blank expressions. Inside the store, Les Haskins, the proprietor, was trading calico to a squaw. He was a stout man with a day's growth of beard on his ruddy cheeks, but there was warmth in his smile.

"Welcome stranger," he greeted Mr. Allan heartily. "About time you paid me a visit. Find that snake I was telling you about?"

"I did," answered the naturalist, thrusting the pail of bones under the trader's nose. "Your rare snake is nothing more than an unusually large rattler!"

"You're tellin' me I don't know a rattler when I see one!"

As the two men launched into a loud, heated argument which finally ended in a stalemate, Gail listened with tolerant amusement. Presently they became aware of her presence again, and Haskins inquired:

"Is that your daughter with you, Henry?"

"No, I never was lucky enough to have a child of my own. Meet Gail Landreth. She's helping me write my new book."

"Teaching you how to spell, you mean," corrected Gail with a ready laugh.

After the two men had talked for a few minutes, Mr. Allan turned to leave.

"Don't forget the pin," Gail reminded him significantly.

"Oh, that's right! Les, have you had any visitors around here lately?"

"Jake Navott was up last week after alligator hides."

"No one else?"

"The Indians told me they saw a couple of men who were sneaking around after egret feathers, but they knew better than to stop at the Post. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, Gail and I found a little silver pin not far from the river. It didn't look like regular Indian work to me."

"May I see it?" requested the trader.

Gail indicated the pin fastened to her blouse.

Les Haskins studied the design a moment and shook his head.

"No, that isn't Indian work. I wouldn't have an idea where it came from."

"Then I guess it's all yours, Gail." Mr. Allan turned toward the door. "Not a valuable pin, perhaps, but an interesting one. At least you'll have a souvenir of your day's sufferings."

"Oh, I didn't suffer so much for all my complaining," contradicted Gail. "I hope you'll take me again sometime."

"Make him bring you, Miss Landreth," the trader said, following the pair to the door. "And be sure to drop in at the Post."

A fat squaw carrying an armload of baskets waddled across the porch toward the group. Almost rudely she stared at Gail's brown corduroy breeches and high-topped leather shoes.

"You buy?" she demanded, thrusting a basket at the girl. "Cheap."

"No, I don't believe I want any." Gail shook her head and tried to move on.

The squaw deliberately blocked the way. Annoyed, Gail followed her gaze and was surprised to see that she was staring at the newly acquired silver pin.

"Pretty isn't it?" she remarked, mistaking the Indian woman's fixed attention for admiration.

The squaw uttered an angry exclamation. Clutching her baskets, she turned and ran down the path to the river. There she chattered excitedly with other natives.

"Now what is the matter with her?" asked Gail in bewilderment. "Didn't she like my appearance? Or was it something I said?"

Les Haskins shrugged. "You never can tell what notion an Indian will get."

"What did she say to Gail?" asked Mr. Allan gravely.

"I didn't exactly make out."

"See here, Les, I know better! You understand the Seminole language better than you do English. Out with it! What did she say?"

"If you must have it, she called you both thieves and robbers."

"Thieves!" exclaimed Gail, staring toward the river where the Indians had gathered in a group. "How silly! We've taken nothing which belongs to them."

"Were you near any of their villages today?"

Mr. Allan shook his head. "We didn't even see an Indian until we reached the Post."

"Then the squaw must be mixed up. But if I were you I would get away from here before she tries to stir up trouble. I'll walk down to the river with you."

"Afraid we'll be scalped, Les?"

"These Indians can be unpleasant if they fancy they've been wronged."

"You are right," returned Mr. Allan gravely. "Gail and I may be coming back here in a few days and we don't want any future trouble. I wish you would ask that squaw what she thinks it is we stole."

The Indians fell silent as the three approached the water's edge. Mr. Haskins spoke curtly to the squaw who replied in guttural tones, tapping her breast in a significant manner.

"She says you stole a boat," interpreted the trader.

"A boat!" echoed the naturalist. "What gave her that idea?"

"She says she is sure of it because of the pin Miss Landreth is wearing."

Gail fingered the trinket on her blouse. "So it's this Laughing Mask pin which has caused all the trouble! How exciting!"

Haskins talked again with the Indian woman and reported: "I can't make out everything she says. As nearly as I can gather, the Indians lost one of their boats earlier in the week. They think it was taken by a person who wore a silver pin similar to the one Miss Landreth found."

"Tell the squaw we know nothing about the stolen boat," Mr. Allan instructed.

"I already have, Henry. The Indians are satis-

fied now that you didn't steal. They'll take my word for it."

"Then Gail and I may as well move along before they change their minds."

Shaking hands with his friend, Mr. Allan helped Gail into the canoe. He paddled rapidly downstream into the canal, and the clearing was lost to view.

"Well, Gail," he presently commented, "you've always pined for adventure and now you've had a taste of it. If Les hadn't straightened matters for us, we might have had an uncomfortable time with those Indians."

Gail nodded absently. "Strange about that pin we found," she remarked, half to herself. "The moment I saw it I said to myself—"

Her speculation ended abruptly at that point, for the canoe was approaching the Fulton lock. As Mr. Allan had learned earlier that day, there was no attendant to let them through. The gears were chained and padlocked.

"Another portage," Gail sighed.

"No, I think we'll shoot the spillway," Mr. Allan responded cheerfully. "The water should be deep enough."

He indicated a narrow paved apron over which water boiled at a great rate.

"I've heard of shooting rapids but never a spillway!" Gail gasped, genuinely alarmed.

"We'll establish the style," Mr. Allan chuckled, steering for the narrow opening. "I plan to give you one last thrill for the day. We easily can upset, you know."

"Just be sure it's a thrill, not a spill," Gail countered as the bow of the canoe swung sharply. "I can't swim—"

Her words blurred, for already they had begun the breathless, daring trip through racing waters.

CHAPTER II

SHOOTING THE SPILLWAY

IN THE next instant all thoughts save those of self-preservation were driven from Gail's mind, for the swift current caught the canoe and held it relentlessly. Swinging through the break in the spillway, it traveled faster and faster, slithering dangerously from side to side.

There came a sickening plunge and a quick descent with the canoe riding low. Gail sat rigidly, almost afraid to breathe. But when it seemed that they must surely capsize, the buoyant craft safely ran the swirling, boiling sluiceway and shot into the canal. Quiet water lay ahead.

The naturalist rested a moment from his strenuous paddling.

"Well, we made it without an upset," he remarked cheerfully. "What were you saying about being unable to swim, Gail?"

"I only started to tell you I can't do it wearing heavy leather boots."

"That's better," he laughed. "It never would do for me to have a secretary who doesn't know how to swim."

Presently, the naturalist brought the canoe to shore and they stepped out on the mud flats.

"We made the trip in rather good time," he said, glancing at his watch. "Even now, it's only a quarter past three."

Gail helped Mr. Allan haul the canoe from the water and hide it in a clump of bushes. They carried their paddles and equipment to a car which stood where they had left it early that morning, beside a dirt road bisecting this lonely stretch of Florida wasteland.

"Mr. Allan, is there any way to reach the trading post except by canoe?" Gail inquired curiously as she climbed into the automobile.

"There's a road of sorts—this one we're on now—and a foot path, though I'd not recommend either. Thinking of going back alone, Gail?"

"Hardly!"

The car bounced and jolted over the rough road, through pine-fringed, uninhabited swamp land. They came, after several miles, to a paved highway and sped on until they reached the seacoast town of Cordell Beach.

"Shall I take you home?" inquired Mr. Allan absently.

"To my rooming house, if you will," requested Gail. "I am an orphan these days, you know."

"That's right, I forgot for a minute. Heard from your parents since they left Cordell Beach?"

"Yes, I had a letter yesterday. Mother wrote that that she and Dad had reached the Great Smokies, and expected to stay there for at least a month."

"Lonesome, aren't you?" Mr. Allan bestowed a quick, knowing glance upon the girl.

"Well, I have a queer feeling when I see our house closed up," she admitted frankly. "But Mrs. Andon's place isn't half bad when you become accustomed to it. Evenings are the worst. Nothing to do except read and maybe go to a movie."

A week earlier, Gail's parents had left Cordell Beach on a three months' vacation trip through the northern states. Since it had not seemed practical for the sixteen-year-old girl to live alone in a great empty house, they wisely had insisted that during their absence she take a room with Mrs. Matilda Andon, an acquaintance of the family.

"Why not have dinner with me tonight at the Surf Club?" suggested Mr. Allan impulsively.

"Oh, I'd love it!" Gail cried, her face brightening. "But I didn't mean to hint."

"Of course you didn't, Gail. We'll have time for a swim, too. Would you like that?"

"Who wouldn't after such a scorching day? Only I haven't any clothes suitable for your ritzy club, Mr. Allan."

"Nonsense! Just wear what you have on."

"These dirty corduroys?"

"Well, then we'll stop at your rooming house and

you may change into a dress," Mr. Allan conceded. "But don't take too long to primp."

"I'll only wash my ears," Gail promised, laughing.

The car stopped in front of a plain stucco dwelling on a quiet street scantily shaded by palms. She ran inside and hurried to her room on the second floor. Quickly, she changed into cool white linen and found her bathing suit.

"That was fast work," Mr. Allan praised as she reentered the car. "Oh, I forgot to mention, you'll meet an old, rather distinguished friend of mine at dinner. Doctor Frank Breckenridge, a missionary who has spent most of his life in China."

"Won't I be in the way?" Gail asked uneasily. "You know my 'I.Q.' isn't equal to that of these cosmopolitan friends of yours."

"You'll like Doctor Breckenridge, and we have no state secrets to discuss. Or at least I don't think so. Still, I've been wondering what lies behind his unexpected visit to the United States."

"You always manage to know so many interesting persons," Gail remarked admiringly. "Where do you meet them all?"

"Oh, here and there. My lecture work brings me into contact with a certain number of well-known people. Bores, most of them. Now Doctor Breckenridge is different. I met him ten years ago in

China. He did me a great service which I've never forgotten."

Lapsing into meditative silence, Mr. Allan did not speak again until the car rolled beneath the canopied entrance of the Surf Club. The building was a massive one of white stone. On the rear lawn, sloping down to the water, a flock of flamingoes, long-legged with pink-tipped wings, walked in stately grace.

"Good afternoon, Fred," Mr. Allan greeted the doorman. "Have my car sent around to be washed, please."

"At once, sir," the man responded in a deferential tone.

Gail and her employer entered the fashionable club, their heels clicking sharply on the marble floor. Bellboys in brass buttons were dashing about. A profusion of potted palms, the marble pillars, deep pile carpets, and richly upholstered furniture, all served to create a scrambled impression of luxury.

"How much does it cost to break a vase in this place?" Gail asked in awe.

Mr. Allan smiled broadly. "You might try it and see. Now I'll run up to my room for a minute and leave this specimen case. You might wait for me in the patio."

Left alone, Gail wandered into the tiled patio which gave entrance to the indoor swimming pool.

A few persons were paddling in the clear blue water; a far greater number lolled indolently about the palm-bordered terrace.

Gail sat down on a stone bench to await Mr. Allan. Presently, aware of a slight stir among the bathers, she turned her head. A distinguished looking middle-aged woman with snow-white hair had entered the patio. Her fingers blazed with diamonds and a striking green jade pin held the collar of a severe black satin gown in place.

Haughtily, gazing neither to the right nor the left, the woman leisurely crossed the terrace. Well aware of the sensation her appearance created, she walked toward a string of cabanas facing the sea. Entering one of the little structures, she closed the door behind her.

"I wonder who she is?" speculated Gail. "Probably a rich old dowager."

Mr. Allan appeared at that moment, a bathing suit swinging carelessly from his arm.

"Where shall we swim?" he asked. "This pool or the sea?"

"Oh, the sea by all means," decided Gail instantly. "I've always wanted to dress inside one of those cute little cabanas."

"Then you shall. I rent the third one from the East end. Just walk inside and make yourself at home."

As they crossed the beach together, Gail spoke

of the woman she had observed, asking her employer if he knew her name.

"You must mean Queenie, Gail."

"Queenie?"

"Oh, that's only my pet name for her. Otherwise she is known as Madam Alexandre, though it's a deep mystery where she acquired the Madam part."

"And is she a very distinguished person?"

"In her own estimation."

"Actually she isn't?"

"For all I know she may be, Gail. Madam Alexandre doesn't offer much information about herself, which doubtlessly draws more attention."

"Does she reside here at the Club?" Gail asked, staring toward the cabana where the woman had disappeared.

"No. She keeps a few servants, and otherwise lives alone in a great barn of a place out on Braemer Drive."

"Wealthy, I suppose?"

"You can't tell who has money these days, Gail. Often it's all show. But then, Madam Alexandre has given the impression that she has plenty. She's spent her winters at Cordell Beach every season now for eight years. Why this interest in her, Gail?"

"Well, she seems like a rather spectacular personality. And I noticed she wore such expensive looking jewelry."

"Madam Alexandre collects it, I've been told," explained Mr. Allan. "The absorbing interest of her life is supposed to be antique jewelry. She has little to do with the townspeople. In the years I've lived at this club I've never seen her speak to a dozen persons."

"Ah, a woman of mystery," commented Gail, lowering her voice because they had reached the cabanas. "Now you've really aroused my curiosity."

Mr. Allan gave her a key and she entered the little bath-house. The luxuriously furnished dressing room quite came up to her anticipation, and adjoining it was a shower.

Stepping outside a few minutes later, she looked about for Mr. Allan. He was nowhere to be seen, having vanished into a cabana belonging to a friend.

Two doors away, reclining lazily in a conch-shaped chair of blue leather, was Madam Alexandre. Her dark brown eyes fastened appraisingly upon Gail for an instant, then wandered away. Deliberately, she raised a magazine to screen her face.

Mr. Allan soon appeared, and with Gail, plunged into the cold surf. They swam for a half hour and then toasted themselves on the warm sand. As they arose to leave, a bellboy crossed the beach toward them.

"Now what?" murmured the naturalist, frowning.

"Henry Allan?" the boy asked. "Telegram for you, sir."

Reading the message, the naturalist crumpled the paper and allowed it to drop from his hand. Caught by the wind, it blew to the corner of Madam Alexandre's canopied cabana where it lodged fast.

"Gail," Mr. Allan said apologetically, "I am afraid this telegram may alter my plans for the evening."

Gail nodded, only half listening. Her attention had focused upon Madam Alexandre. Without stirring from her chair, the woman had thrust out her red-slippered foot, pushing the crumpled paper beneath the flooring of the cabana porch.

CHAPTER III

A CHANGE OF PLANS

So DEFTLY was the act committed that Gail wondered if it had been done thoughtlessly. Madame Alexandre immediately lost interest in the telegram. Without glancing toward the pair on the beach, she leaned back in her chair and gazed toward the restless sea.

"Mr. Allan, I hope that telegram contained no information of great importance," Gail ventured uneasily.

"No, it merely alters my plans. Doctor Breckenridge wires he has been detained and will not be able to take dinner here tonight."

"Oh, I see." Gail was disappointed, for she had looked forward to meeting her employer's friend.

"I never knew Doctor Breckenridge to break an engagement before," Mr. Allan continued thoughtfully. "Punctuality and promises are almost a religion with him."

"He didn't explain why he would be unable to come?"

"No, and that's not like the Doctor either. Some-

how the message isn't the sort one would expect him to send. Too stiff and formal."

Gail glanced at her employer, surprised by his tone. "You think he never wrote it?"

"Oh, he must have written the message, or else it was sent by a secretary or his daughter."

Gail sank down on the warm sand, digging herself a comfortable hole. When she looked up at Mr. Allan again he was still frowning.

"You really think something may be wrong?" she inquired softly.

The naturalist's manner changed at once. "No, nothing of the sort, Gail. The truth is, I was thinking about another matter. Something which slipped my mind until a moment ago."

"Another engagement?"

"Nothing definite, but I really should see a man at the Clark Hotel. He's leaving town later tonight. Now that Doctor Breckenridge isn't coming—"

"Don't hesitate because of me," Gail interposed, guessing that he did not wish to disappoint her. "We'll have dinner together another time. I've had a wonderful day as it is."

"I really want you to have dinner here at the club," insisted Mr. Allan. "It will be an experience for you. Tell you what! Would you mind dining alone?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'll leave you here and go directly to the

Clark Hotel. Swim as long as you like, and have a nice dinner. The bill will be added to my account. When you're ready to leave, call for the car. I'll arrange to have my chauffeur drive you home and bring the car back."

"You needn't bother to do that," Gail protested. "I can go home on the bus."

"Indeed, no, Gail. I'll leave the car for you. Sorry to run out on you this way."

"I'll have a nice time. Thanks for a wonderful afternoon."

Mr. Allan started down the beach only to pause. "Oh, by the way, I'll not be working on my book tomorrow. You may take the day off."

"Thanks again, Mr. Allan."

After he had gone, Gail lay flat on her shapely back, staring up at the blue sky. She wondered if any other girl ever had such a generous, kind employer. Her "job" was something of a joke even to herself. She did not average two hours of daily work yet received in return fifteen dollars each week. But then, Mr. Allan knew she was saving for a college course at Miami, and he enjoyed being liberal.

After a time Gail saw Madam Alexandre desert her chair and wade timidly into the shallow water. There she floundered about trying vainly to float on her back.

Impulsively, Gail arose and went over to her.

"May I help you?" she offered. "If you would just hold your head farther back—"

Madam Alexandre struggled to her feet, gazing at the girl with disdain. "No, thank you," she replied coldly.

Without giving Gail an opportunity to apologize or retreat, she turned, and crossing the beach, entered her cabana.

"Friendly as a leopard cat!" Gail muttered, returning to her own bath-house. "Well, I guess I asked for it."

She dressed leisurely, experimenting with a new way to comb her curly brown hair. When she stepped outside, carefully locking the door behind her, long shadows had fallen across the white sand.

Gail glanced toward Madam Alexandre's cabana. The door was closed, the window shades drawn. Madam Alexandre herself could be seen walking toward the clubhouse, moving with the slow, easy grace of an actress.

"Wonder how long it takes to acquire a panther glide?" Gail mused admiringly. "I must practice it when I get home."

Aware that time was slipping away, she sighed, and started down the beach. However, drawing opposite Madam Alexandre's deserted cabana she paused to peer curiously beneath the porch.

The crumpled telegram no longer was there.

"Now did the wind carry that paper away, or did Madam Alexandre pick it up while I was inside the bath-house?" Gail speculated. "If she did, she must be a very inquisitive individual for all her pose of being too elegant to speak to ordinary people!"

To make certain that the telegram had not blown far under the porch, she dropped on hands and knees, gazing into the dark hole. The paper was not there.

Instead, at the edge of the porch, she noticed a series of indistinct shoe prints which she immediately decided had been made by Madam Alexandre's sharp-heeled slippers.

"I can't imagine anyone being so curious!" she told herself in disgust. "Why, it's nearly as bad as prying into one's private mail! At any rate, she didn't learn anything of great importance."

Straightening, Gail brushed sand from her skirt and crossed the cabana porch which offered a short-cut to the clubhouse. The blue leather chair recently occupied by Madam Alexandre still stood by the railing, its delicately colored fabric exposed to the slanting rays of the sun.

In passing, Gail glanced toward it, and then abruptly paused. Two small objects, a comb and a silver vanity case, lay on the curving seat.

"Madam Alexandre must have forgotten these things," she thought.

Considering the woman's unfriendly attitude, she

was tempted to leave the articles lying on the chair. Absently she opened the lid of the monogramed vanity case.

Something hard and shiny slipped out, striking the floor at her feet. Gail gasped in astonishment and made a quick snatch to save it from rolling into the sand. The object was a carved jade ring.

CHAPTER IV

BONNIEWOOD

EVEN A casual examination convinced Gail that the ring was a valuable one.

"Now what shall I do?" she asked herself uncomfortably. "I don't dare leave it here to be stolen."

Ever sensitive to rebuffs, Gail was not eager to approach Madam Alexandre a second time. However, it was out of the question to leave the ring and vanity case lying on the chair. She must return the articles or be responsible for their loss.

Replacing the ring in the vanity case, Gail pocketed the objects and walked hurriedly to the clubhouse. Madam Alexandre was not to be found in the lobby. After walking about for a few minutes, the girl learned from a bellboy that the woman she sought had left the building less than five minutes earlier.

"I found something which belongs to her," she explained. "I had intended to return it."

"Can't you leave it at the desk?" the boy suggested.

"I suppose I could. Where does Madam Alexandre live?"

"At an estate called Bonniewood on Braemer Drive."

"Perhaps, I'll drive out there," Gail said thoughtfully.

It had occurred to her that it might be interesting to observe how Madam Alexandre would react to the return of the jade ring. Certainly the woman owed her an apology for her previous rudeness. Yes, after dinner she would ask Mr. Allan's chauffeur, Jennings, to drive her to Bonniewood. He would not mind and neither would her employer.

When finally Gail started for Madam Alexandre's estate, it was nearly dark. The car rolled through a pillared gateway, and following a shrubbed drive, drew up before an ancient but impressive dwelling of colored stone.

"Will you wait, please?" she requested Jennings. "I'll not be gone long."

As Gail rang the doorbell, her gaze wandered about the unkempt yard. Palm trees, half-uprooted by strong winds, had been allowed to remain growing at rakish angles. Luxurious-growing vines, untrimmed and untrained, had taken possession of the house walls, running their tendrils to the green tiles of the roof.

The front door was opened by the butler, a dark, foreign-looking man with a slight scar across his

left cheek. He stared at Gail as if she were an intruder.

"This is where Madam Alexandre lives, I believe?" she inquired politely.

"Quite right, Miss, but Madam Alexandre does not receive callers at this hour."

"I realize it's late," returned Gail, "but I am sure she will see me. At the Surf Club Madam Alexandre lost a vanity case and a valuable ring. I found the articles and came to return them."

The butler's aloof manner changed at once. "Come in," he requested, swinging open the door. "If you will wait, I feel sure Madam Alexandre will see you."

Leading the girl to a small, illuminated reception room, he motioned for her to be seated. Then he quietly withdrew.

In the glow of the bridge lamp, the room had a decidedly moth-eaten appearance. The rug, although an Oriental, was old and in need of a trip to the dry cleaners. Draperies and furniture, likewise, were dusty and threadbare.

"Madam Alexandre must keep very careless servants," Gail mused. "Either that, or she doesn't care. However, she's neat as a pin in her own appearance."

Her attention roved to a glass cabinet which contained odd pieces of antique jewelry. She arose to

inspect the treasures, but before she could cross the room, the butler returned.

"Madam will see you in the patio," he announced, opening a door.

Gail found herself gazing into a tiled room where a fountain splashed. As she hesitated, a parrot squawked raucously: "Come in! Come in! Come in!"

Two points of wavering light drew the startled girl's eyes to a supper table where Madam Alexandre sat alone, the parrot perched on her chair. Save for the candles, the darkening patio had no illumination.

"Yes?" inquired Madam Alexandre with a hint of impatience.

Fumbling at her purse, Gail crossed the patio, and laid the vanity case and comb on the table.

"You left these articles at the beach this afternoon," she explained. "I found them on the chair where you had been sitting."

"Why, I had not missed them!" Eagerly, Madam Alexandre opened the silver vanity case. Upon finding the jade ring safe in its nest of mesh she laughed in relief.

"Oh, thank you, my dear! Thank you!" she murmured, losing her hauteur. "So careless of me! And I value this ring highly!"

In the dim light Gail thought that the woman did

not recognize her or, at least, Madam Alexandre chose to ignore their previous meeting. She turned to leave.

"Wait, my dear. You must not go without telling me your name."

"Gail Landreth."

"You are not a member of the Surf Club?"

"No, I do part-time work for Mr. Allan. I was there as his guest today."

"Allan?" the woman repeated. "Oh, yes, to be sure. Well, Miss Landreth, I can't tell you how grateful I am to recover my property. This ring is quite valuable. You may not have known."

"I rather thought it was," Gail returned dryly.

"You must have a reward. I shall write out a check for you. Say for a hundred dollars."

Gail was rather stunned by such a generous reward, but she shook her head.

"Thank you, Madam Alexandre. I couldn't possibly take it."

The woman regarded her with a peculiar half-smile. "My dear, you are an odd child. So you have no use for the money?"

"Oh, I could use it without any trouble at all," Gail laughed. "It's just that I don't wish to take money when obviously it was my duty to return the ring."

Before Madam Alexandre could reply, the butler

appeared in the arched doorway, his long, lean body throwing a grotesque shadow over the white tiles. Speaking a name which Gail did not catch, he told his mistress that she had another caller.

Immediately Madam Alexandre's face lost every trace of friendliness. She arose from her chair, saying: "Show the girl in, James. I have been expecting her."

And then to Gail who had started to leave: "No, please wait, Miss Landreth. This interview will take only a few minutes."

Gail sank back into a chair close beside the stone basin of the fountain. The butler presently returned, followed by a girl whose face she could not see plainly.

Unaware that another person was in the patio, the newcomer addressed herself directly to Madam Alexandre.

"I came to Cordell Beach as soon as your telegram arrived, Madam Alexandre," she said with dignity. "Your accusation against my father distressed me deeply."

Madam Alexandre stood by the table, absently fingering a silver knife. She made no move to introduce the two callers, choosing to ignore Gail.

"Your father has stolen five thousand dollars from me," she said coldly.

"No, no, that is not true!" the girl protested.

"You have no right to make such an accusation."

"If it is not true, then tell me why your father failed to keep his promise?"

"I do not understand it myself," returned the girl, "but I assure you my father is not a thief. He would never willingly keep a penny of your money, Madam Alexandre."

"The fact remains that he has kept it. Over a month ago I gave him five thousand dollars. In return I was to have received an antique jade pendant. What do I have? Nothing!"

"My father came to Cordell Beach several days ago to deliver the jewel into your hands, Madam Alexandre. I know that to be a fact."

"Then what became of your father? He never arrived here."

"I do not know." The girl spoke in such a distressed tone that her words carried complete conviction to Gail if not her hostess. "I am deeply alarmed for his safety."

"If your father has disappeared he did it on purpose," declared Madam Alexandre in a cutting tone. "I warn you, my patience is completely exhausted. Unless the money or the jewel is turned over to me within the next three days I shall notify the police."

The girl drew herself up proudly. "I shall welcome an investigation," she said. "My father is an honorable man, highly respected in China and—"

"Well, this isn't China," interrupted Madam

Alexandre rudely. "Let's discuss it no further. Either my money must be returned or I'll call the police into the case. That is all."

Head held high, the girl retreated toward the arched doorway. As she passed the fountain she saw Gail for the first time, and involuntarily paused. They stared at each other, then the girl moved hurriedly on.

After she had gone, Madam Alexandre drew a deep sigh.

"Having money is such a bore, Miss Landreth. So many persons always are trying to cheat you. One learns to become hard."

"The girl seemed sincere," Gail ventured. "At least, I thought so."

"Acting a part," responded Madam Alexandre with a shrug. "I am convinced her father is an outright sharper. Now to get back to your problem again. Won't you reconsider and accept a small reward?"

"Thank you, I couldn't possibly take money."

"Very well, if that is your decision. May I send you home in my car?"

"Mr. Allan gave me the use of his automobile for the evening. It is waiting outside."

"Then I am afraid there is no way for me to show my gratitude," smiled Madam Alexandre. "So sorry."

She walked with Gail from the patio to the front

door. As they paused for a moment in the glare of a hall light, her gaze fell upon the silver pin which the girl wore on her dress.

"What an interesting piece of jewelry!" she exclaimed admiringly. "May I see it, please?"

Gail could not refuse the request. She offered the pin for examination.

"I always am very much interested in unusual jewelry," explained Madam Alexandre. "This pin is different from anything I have ever seen. May I ask where you bought it?"

"I found it, or rather my employer did."

"Indeed!" Madam Alexandre's voice held a note of amusement. "You seem to have a talent for finding lost articles."

"I was rather lucky that way today."

"You have no idea who the owner may be?"

"No, the pin was found in such an unusual place, I doubt if I ever shall trace the person."

"How would you like to sell it to me?" Madam Alexandre proposed suddenly.

"Oh, I couldn't! Mr. Allan gave the pin to me, and I want to keep it."

"I'll pay you more than it possibly could be worth," coaxed the woman. "Say fifteen dollars."

Gail shook her head. She stretched out her hand to take back the pin. Reluctantly, Madam Alexandre relinquished it.

"Your offer is a generous one," Gail said politely, "but I've taken a fancy to the pin."

Madam Alexandre had nothing more to say as she let the girl out the front door, although obviously she was irritated by the refusal. She remained at the window, watching until the automobile had swung down the driveway.

"A peculiar sort of woman," thought Gail, glancing back through the car window. "Hard as nails. Accustomed to having her own way. Now why was she so interested in my pin?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss?" inquired the chauffeur, turning his head.

"I was only mumbling to myself, Jennings," Gail said. "Take me to my rooming house, please."

The automobile passed through the gateway, turning down the main boulevard which led back to the city. As they swung over a low hill, the geometrical pattern of Cordell Beach spread out in dots of light before them.

Along the roadside, dangerously close to the stream of traffic, trudged a dark figure. Jennings tooted the horn in warning.

Startled, the girl turned toward the car, and became frozen with fright. To avoid striking her, Jennings slammed on the brakes, bringing the automobile to a lurching halt.

"Why don't you walk on the other side of the

road?" he demanded angrily. "I nearly ran you down."

"I—I'm sorry," the girl mumbled. "It was my fault."

Gail recognized the voice. Quickly rolling down the window glass, she called eagerly: "Aren't you the girl I saw a few minutes ago at Madam Alexandre's estate?"

The one addressed came slowly to the side of the car, peering up at Gail. Recognizing her, she replied in a low voice: "Yes, I was there."

"Can't we give you a ride into town?"

The girl debated a moment, and then with a friendly smile, accepted the offer.

"I am very tired," she admitted, entering the car. "I have walked many miles today. All the distance to Bonniewood and this far back to town. You are a friend of Madam Alexandre's?"

"Not exactly a friend," corrected Gail. "I never met her until tonight."

The other girl measured her with a shrewd, appraising glance. "You were in the patio when she talked with me. You heard the cruel things she said about my father?"

"I heard, but I can't say I understood. The conversation meant nothing to me."

"Madam Alexandre accuses my father of stealing money from her!" the girl declared bitterly. "The accusation is ridiculous!"

"Madam Alexandre probably spoke without considering her words. By the way, I haven't introduced myself. I am Gail Landreth."

"And my name is Sara Breckenridge."

"Breckenridge!" exclaimed Gail, startled. "You're not by chance acquainted with a Doctor Frank Breckenridge?"

The wary expression vanished instantly from Sara's face.

"Very well acquainted," she laughed, "Doctor Breckenridge is my father!"

CHAPTER V

A NEW FRIEND

"WELL, OF all things!" exclaimed Gail, beaming from ear to ear. "Your father is a good friend of my employer, Henry Allan."

"I have heard my father speak of him many times," Sara Breckenridge nodded. She spoke with a precision which indicated she had learned her English in a foreign country. "Ten years ago they were together in China."

Gail sat back, studying her companion with new interest. Sara appeared to be about her own age, although a few inches taller. Her elfin face had a tired, worried expression; brown eyes darted restlessly.

Knowing that her employer thought highly of Doctor Breckenridge, Gail immediately warmed to Sara. She could not believe Madam Alexandre's accusation against the girl's father. However, she was curious to learn the entire story.

"I'll tell you all about it," said Sara, as if divining her thought. "Madam Alexandre is a very wealthy woman who collects jewels. For many years she has wished to purchase a jade pendant which once

belonged to a collection owned by the Dowager Empress of China. Last month, acting as an agent for a group of Chinese friends, my father brought the stone to this country, intending to sell it. The proceeds were to provide funds for starving Chinese refugees."

"Then Madam Alexandre bought the jewel from your father?"

"Yes, she made the initial payment of five thousand dollars which was required before the jewel could be transported to Cordell Beach. At least, Father told me that he expected to receive her cheque."

"Madam Alexandre really has a grievance then?"

"She has," Sara acknowledged reluctantly. "Ten days ago my father left New York City, intending to come directly to Cordell Beach and deliver the jade pendant to Madam Alexandre. Since then he has sent me no message. A telegram from the Madam brought me here to investigate."

"Your father must be in Cordell Beach. Mr. Allan received a telegram from him only today."

"He did?" Sara asked in amazement and relief. "Do you know what the message said?"

"Mr. Allan had expected your father to take dinner with him. He merely cancelled the engagement."

"I wish I could see the message."

"The original isn't available, but I am sure Mr.

Allan will be glad to repeat the exact wording. Now that I think of it, he mentioned that the wire didn't sound exactly like your father."

"Someone else may have sent it!"

Gail stared at Sara. "Then you think something may have happened to your father since he arrived at Cordell Beach?"

"I am afraid of it, terribly afraid. Many persons, some of them enemies perhaps, knew that Father had the jade pendant with him. I cannot tell you the history of the jewel now, but for years its ownership has been disputed."

"You mean your father had no right to sell it?"

"He had a perfect right. In any case he acts only as an agent for others. I tell you this so that you will understand what may have happened. My father is accountable for the money and the jewel. His failure to deliver the pendant must mean that he has been waylaid."

"If you really believe that, you should go to the police before Madam Alexandre carries out her threat," Gail urged soberly.

"I would go at once, only Father's Chinese friends might resent the publicity. To air matters in court is not their way."

"Nevertheless, if anything should have happened to him—"

"I may be unduly anxious," Sara interposed

quickly. "But he promised to write when he reached Cordell Beach. I can't help feeling frightened."

"Perhaps you'll find your father staying at one of the hotels."

Sara shook her head. "Before going to see Madam Alexandre I inquired almost everywhere. Father has not registered at any of the places I would expect him to stay."

"Then I don't wonder you're alarmed," replied Gail. "How long have you been in Cordell Beach?"

"I arrived on the morning train."

"And where are you staying?"

Sara hesitated and answered: "I haven't a place yet. My suitcase is checked at the station. Could you recommend a small hotel?"

"Well, there are several."

"An inexpensive one," Sara amended. "The truth is, I haven't much money left."

Gail considered whether or not to suggest that Sara take a room at Mrs. Andon's place. She was almost certain Mr. Allan would wish to keep in touch with the girl and offer any help he could in tracing Doctor Breckenridge.

"How would you like to come home with me?" she proposed abruptly. "That is, to my rooming house. Mrs. Andon keeps a very comfortable place, though it isn't luxurious. Her rates are reasonable."

"Any place suits me," said Sara with a tired sigh.

"Then we'll go there and you may see the house for yourself. If you decide to stay, we can bring your suitcase from the station."

Nodding in agreement, Sara dropped her head on the cushion and closed her eyes. She did not speak again during the remainder of the ride, although several times she smiled in a friendly manner.

The car drew up before Mrs. Andon's rooming house. Gail told Jennings that he need not wait.

"I've abused my limousine privileges enough for one day," she apologized. "If I need any more taxi service tonight, I'll use my own jitney."

Gail owned no car of her own, but during the absence of her parents, she had been given the use of the old family automobile. In a week's time she had driven it only twice, for her frugal nature rebelled at the thought of spending her own money for gasoline.

Escorting Sara into the house, Gail went in search of Mrs. Andon.

"Take another roomer?" the housewife protested. "Oh, Gail, I don't see how I can. I have so much work now. Why, this week it took me a full half day to iron the sheets and towels."

"Then I suppose you couldn't. But Sara is real nice, and her father is a friend of Mr. Allan."

"Well, that's different!" exclaimed Mrs. Andon. "Why didn't you say so in the first place? I'll as-

sign her the little south bedroom adjoining yours."

While the housewife looked up fresh linen, Gail took her new friend upstairs to inspect the room.

"It's rather small," she said doubtfully. "Do you think it will be all right, Sara?"

"Oh, yes, it's fine."

Sara gave the room only one hasty glance. As she sat down on the edge of the bed, her face appeared pale and drawn. She seemed to take no interest in her surroundings.

"You're not ill?" Gail asked uneasily.

"Only tired."

"Rest awhile, and then we'll go to the station for your suitcase. The bathroom's at the end of the hall. Afraid you'll have to share it."

Sara did not answer. When Gail returned a few minutes later with linen, she sat in exactly the same posture.

"If you need anything, thump on the wall," Gail said. "I'll be in the next room."

With an effort, Sara aroused herself. "Please excuse my bad manners," she apologized. "I was thinking about Father. You have been very kind. Everything is nice."

"We may as well start for the station whenever you feel equal to it."

"I'll be ready in a minute." Sara picked up a towel and disappeared down the hall.

Debating momentarily, Gail descended to the

lower floor. She telephoned the Surf Club, only to learn that Mr. Allan was not in his suite.

"Please ask him to call me when he comes in," she requested, and gave her telephone number.

In her own room again, Gail presently heard a light tap on the door.

"Come in," she called cordially.

Sara stepped timidly over the threshold. She had changed a crumpled traveling suit for a plain flowered silk, and her face was more composed.

"I am ready now, Miss Landreth."

"Oh, please don't 'Miss Landreth' me. I'm just Gail. Wait until I put on a sweater and we'll be on our way."

Reaching into a bureau drawer, she chose one of yellow wool and pulled it over her head. Then as an after-thought she unfastened the Laughing Mask pin from her frock, intending to replace it on the sweater.

In the act of fastening the clasp she became aware of a strange sensation—it was as if she actually could feel eyes boring into her.

Glancing quickly up, Gail was startled to see Sara looking steadily at her. Not a glimmer of friendliness shone in the dark eyes, only undisguised anger and suspicion.

"Why, Sara," she gasped, "is anything wrong?"

"Decidedly! I might have known you were no friend! You tricked me into coming here!"

"I tricked you! Sara, I simply don't understand. What has caused this sudden change in your feeling toward me?"

Sara pointed to the Laughing Mask trinket which Gail had transferred to her sweater.

"As if you don't know!" she said mockingly. "It's that pin!"

CHAPTER VI

MISTRUST

COMPLETELY BEWILDERED by the bitter attack, Gail regarded Sara in blank astonishment.

"I don't understand," she repeated. "What has this pin to do with it? What have I done to offend you?"

"You've not told me the truth. I should have guessed that you were Madam Alexandre's friend, for I saw you in her home. You schemed to get me here!"

"I schemed! Why, Sara, I honestly thought I was doing you a favor. Don't you believe that Henry Allan is my employer, your father's friend?"

"Henry Allan is Father's friend, of that I am sure."

"But you don't know about me?" Gail's eyes flashed dangerously. "Well, you're perfectly free to leave this minute if you feel so sure that I am deceiving you."

They glared at each other, and then suddenly, both began to laugh.

"I guess I am being rather theatrical," Sara ac-

knowledged. "But why are you wearing that pin?"

Gail fingered the Laughing Mask trinket. "This? Because I like it. What has it to do with my being a friend or an enemy?"

"May I see it, please?" Sara requested, without answering the question.

Gail offered it to her, waiting while she examined the design minutely.

"Yes, it is the same! A horrid, grinning mask! Gail, where did you get this pin?"

"I've been asked that same question twice today. First by Madam Alexandre and now by you. It was found."

"Then the pin doesn't really belong to you?" Sara's relief was obvious. "You're not a member of a secret organization?"

"Goodness, no!"

"Then I did make a mistake. I am sorry I spoke so sharply. You couldn't have sent the letter."

"What letter?" Gail asked curiously. "I wish you would explain. I truly want to be your friend."

"And I believe you now. Yes, I will tell you about the letter."

Sara sat down on the edge of the bed, all the while studying the pin which she still held.

"Before my father left New York for Cordell Beach he received an anonymous letter," she revealed. "He did not show it to me, but after he had started south I found it by accident. The letter

warned him he must not try to sell the jade pendant."

"The same piece of jewelry Madam Alexandre purchased?"

"Yes," Sara nodded. "I am sure Father kept the letter from me so I would not worry. Instead of a signature, a crude drawing appeared at the bottom of the page. It was a picture of a grinning mask!"

"So that was why you were suspicious of me? The picture and the design of this pin are similar?"

"I would say they're identical."

"That's funny," Gail replied soberly. "If there should be a relationship—" she broke off and finished: "Sara, in the car you mentioned that the jade pendant had an unusual history."

"It was formerly a possession of the Dowager Empress of China, but also was claimed by the Manchu puppet Emperor of Manchuria. The controversy has lasted many years."

"Would either faction try to regain the jewel?"

"Followers of the Manchu puppet Emperor might do anything to get it back. On the boat, coming over from China, I was certain we were watched by two men. Father only laughed at me. Now I am afraid he has fallen into the hands of enemies."

"Oh, possibly he's only been detained somewhere," Gail said comfortingly. "Tomorrow Mr. Allan will help you trace him."

"You really think my father is safe?"

"Yes, I do, Sara. If the telegram Mr. Allan received was genuine, then he must be somewhere in Cordell Beach."

"When may I see Mr. Allan?"

"I left word for him to telephone here tonight, so we should hear from him soon. Sara, what became of the threatening letter? You saved it?"

"I have it in my suitcase checked at the station. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, I would, and I know Mr. Allan will be interested, too."

Despite a firm determination to consider Sara's case in a calm, unemotional way, Gail was steadily growing more excited. Her common sense warned her that a connection between the anonymous letter and the Laughing Mask pin was unlikely, yet the possibility intrigued her. Why, if it should develop that Doctor Breckenridge actually had disappeared while in possession of the jade pendant claimed by Madam Alexandre, it would mean she had stumbled into a mystery!

"One thing after another has happened today," she mused. "First, an exciting trip into the Everglades where Mr. Allan and I were accused of stealing a boat! Then adventure number two with Madam Alexandre. And now fate seems to have tossed me another prize in the way of Sara and her missing father!"

Glancing at her companion's troubled face, Gail felt a twinge of conscience. "I ought to be ashamed of myself, thinking about mystery when the poor kid is half-sick over her father," she reflected sternly.

As the girls started for the garage, she explained to Sara that she had found the silver pin in the Everglades.

"I wish I could see the exact place where it was picked up," Sara replied. "Will you take me there sometime?"

"I guess you don't know much about the Everglades," said Gail with a smile. "It's mostly swamp and saw grass with a few snakes and cabbage palms tossed in for good measure. One doesn't go there whenever the notion strikes."

"Oh, I didn't understand. This is my first trip to Florida. In fact, it's my first visit to the United States since I was ten years old."

"You're not the only person who has a wrong idea of the Everglades," Gail said considerately. "Perhaps sometime, Mr. Allan will take us both."

The tropical night was calm and still. As the girls passed beneath a heavily laden orange tree, Gail made a flying leap and seized two golden balls. Offering one of the oranges to her companion, she swung open the creaking garage doors.

"This old gas-wagon isn't in the class of Mr. Allan's automobile," she laughed apologetically, "but it gets you places just the same."

During the ride to the railroad station, Sara volunteered a little information about herself. An only child, she had spent her entire life in China, save for two years immediately following the death of her mother. During that period she had lived with an aunt in New York City.

Sara was a graduate of an American School at Shanghai. Until the outbreak of the Chinese-Japanese war, her father, a missionary doctor, had been in charge of a large base hospital in that city.

"Here we are," stated Gail.

The car drew up near the railroad tracks. Gail parked it and they entered the nearly deserted station. Sara had checked her suitcase in a mechanical device which operated by depositing a coin and removing a key.

"My number is twenty-eight," she remarked, searching in her pocketbook. "I only hope I haven't lost the key."

As she waited, Gail absently twisted the handle of the metal compartment bearing number twenty-eight. To her surprise it turned readily, and the little door dropped down.

"Something is wrong here, Sara!" she exclaimed. "You say you locked this?"

"I certainly did," Sara insisted. "I read the instructions carefully, and then tested the handle to make certain I had locked the compartment."

"It's unlocked now. Anyway, your suitcase is

still here, which is plain luck. It's a wonder someone didn't walk off with it."

As she spoke, Gail lifted out the heavy valise and set it on the floor. Sara took one glance and gave a little cry.

"The straps are unfastened! And the lock's been broken! Someone has opened my suitcase!"

"It does look that way, Sara!"

Repeating that she knew she had locked both the suitcase and the compartment, Sara bent to open the valise.

"We'll find out about this," declared Gail grimly.

Crossing to the ticket window, she reported what had occurred to the station man. He returned with her and after briefly glancing at Sara's suitcase, carefully examined the lock on the compartment. Reluctantly he admitted that it had been forced open.

"Anything missing?" he asked Sara.

Ignoring a group of curious persons who had gathered, she opened the case on the floor. Rapidly she ran her hand beneath the neat piles of wearing apparel.

"Well, everything seems to be here," she acknowledged.

"Were you carrying anything of special value in your suitcase?" the man questioned her.

"No," Sara replied.

"That's all right, then. You've no claim against the company since nothing has been stolen."

Greatly relieved, the station man started to move away, but he paused as a queer expression came over Sara's face. She had thrust her hand deep into a pocket along the back side of the suitcase,

"Wait!" she requested tensely. "Something *has* been stolen. My father's letter is missing!"

CHAPTER VII

INTO THE SWAMP

WHILE GAIL and the station man waited, Sara carefully searched her belongings, but the missing letter could not be found.

"You're sure you had it in the suitcase?" inquired the station agent dubiously.

"Yes, I am. The letter definitely has been taken."

"The person who broke into the suitcase must have known exactly what he was after," commented Gail significantly. "Sara, did you notice anyone watching you here at the station?"

"No, I didn't."

"Late this afternoon I saw a woman who seemed to be having difficulty with one of these compartment locks," the agent revealed. "I asked her if she needed help and she told me 'no.' "

"Then it may have been a woman who broke into the suitcase!" Sara exclaimed. "Was she an American or a foreigner?"

"American. Dark and a stylish dresser. I didn't pay much attention to her."

Sara closed the suitcase, suddenly aware of the

increasing number of persons that had gathered about her.

"Well, forget it," she said with a shrug. "The letter was no great loss anyway."

The agent requested her to sign a paper, releasing his company from liability. She complied, and the girls then carried the suitcase to the parked car.

"Sara," Gail said, swerving the wheel to avoid a taxi, "is your missing letter the same you were telling me about?"

"Yes, the one which warned Father not to sell the jade pendant. Unquestionably, it has been stolen by his enemies. But why?"

"Did anyone know you were carrying the letter?"

"I don't see how any person could have learned about it. I brought it with me upon impulse."

"Perhaps the thief was after something else, and merely took the letter because he happened upon it," Gail ventured thoughtfully.

"I simply don't know what to think," Sara replied. "Oh, I wish I had never heard of that horrid old jewel! Before father is through with the affair it may cost him his life!"

"His life! Oh, Sara, you are taking a gloomy outlook."

"Only a realistic one. Always it seems, bad luck has followed the possessor of the jade pendant."

"But your father merely is acting as an agent in

the sales transaction. Why should he be the target of an attack?"

"There are persons who would commit almost any act to gain the pendant."

"Yet Madam Alexandre seems eager to possess it. She must be a rather brave woman."

Discussing the situation thoroughly, the girls agreed that in the morning Sara should go to Henry Allan and be guided by his advice. Upon reaching Mrs. Andon's rooming house, Gail inquired if the naturalist had telephoned, and was told there had been no call.

"I hope he hasn't left town," she thought. "I remember now he said I needn't work tomorrow. That may mean he'll be away from Cordell Beach."

Gail was tired almost to the point of exhaustion for she had been active since six o'clock that morning. Tumbling into bed she was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. When she awoke warm sunshine flooded the room.

Aware that it was late, she leaped from her comfortable nest and hastily dressed. Sara's door stood ajar. Gail tapped on the panel and was cordially invited to enter.

"Sorry I overslept, Sara. I suppose you've been waiting for me."

"Not very long," Sara replied with a smile. "However, as soon as possible I should like to see Mr. Allan."

"We'll have breakfast and then I'll telephone him again. Strange he hasn't called me."

An hour later, upon communicating with the Surf Club, the girls learned that the naturalist had left word he would be absent until late afternoon.

"Now I don't know what to do," Sara said in perplexity. "I had counted upon Mr. Allan's help."

"You could go to the police," suggested Gail.

"I prefer not to unless Madam Alexandre forces my hand. If Father should be safe here in Cordell Beach, he never would forgive me for creating unfavorable publicity."

Gail did not try to influence Sara. After a moment's thought she said: "I'll not be working today. We might drive from one hotel to another and try to trace your father."

"Oh, it's good of you to offer," the other responded gratefully. "Someday I hope to repay your kindness."

During the next two hours the girls visited twelve hotels. However, their tour ended in discouragement for Doctor Breckenridge could not be found.

"Would he register under a different name?" Gail asked when every possibility had been exhausted.

"He might, but he gave no hint he intended to do such a thing."

At Gail's suggestion, the girls next called at the telegraph office, asking to see a copy of the message which Doctor Breckenridge had sent to Mr. Allan.

Politely they were told that regulations made it impossible to grant their request. A duplicate would be given only to the person for whom the message was intended.

"We already know what the telegram contained," argued Gail. "We're only trying to check on the person who sent it. At least tell us if the message was brought or telephoned to this office."

"It was brought here by Doctor Breckenridge," replied the clerk. "I remember because I waited upon the young man myself."

"Young man!" exclaimed Sara. "Doctor Breckenridge isn't a young man. He's fifty-two."

"The man who filed the telegram was not more than twenty-eight or possibly thirty."

"Then he couldn't have been Father!" Sara cried, turning to Gail. "The message sent to Mr. Allan was an outright deception!"

"This begins to look bad, I'll admit," she acknowledged uneasily. "If only Mr. Allan hadn't gone away today!"

Since Sara was unwilling to discuss the case with the police, nothing more could be done until late afternoon. Gloomily, the girls left the telegraph office and entered a nearby cafe for an early luncheon. Sara scarcely nibbled at her sandwich.

"I can't eat," she said when Gail mentioned her lack of appetite.

It became increasingly evident that during the

hours they waited, Sara would worry herself into a truly deplorable state. Thinking that activity might be better than idleness, Gail suggested a swim at the beach.

"Oh, thank you," declined Sara, "but I am not in a mood for it. What I wish we could do is learn more about that Laughing Mask pin. However, you say it isn't safe to venture into the Everglades."

"I suppose we could go as far as the Trading Post without a guide, but it's a long, disagreeable trip."

"I shouldn't mind that part."

Gail did not believe that a journey to the Post would be profitable save from one standpoint—it would satisfy Sara and keep her mind from her troubles.

All right, we'll go," she decided with sudden enthusiasm. "There's only one road so we can't get lost. But if the car should break down we may spend a night in the swamp."

"Then perhaps we shouldn't go."

"Oh, I enjoy taking chances when they're reasonable ones," laughed Gail. "Come along, we ought to start before it gets a minute later."

Delaying only long enough to change clothing, gather together emergency supplies, and have the car serviced, the girls soon were following the desolate road which led through monotonous stretches of marsh land to the Trading Post.

Mile after mile in a narrow lane between cypress

jungle and palmetto swamp, the automobile sped on. They met no other cars, and the eerie stillness was broken only by the rumble of their own motor and the occasional cry of a wild bird.

Sara watched in awe as a pair of blue and white herons rose from the marsh weeds and zoomed gracefully away. A moment later she drew her companion's attention to a long-billed bird with beautiful white plumes, perched on a roost of scrub cedar.

"Oh, do stop the car a minute, Gail!" she pleaded. "What is that lovely creature?"

"An egret," Gail replied, easing the car to a halt. "Maybe I can get a picture of him."

Reaching for her camera which she always kept in the car, loaded and ready for instant use, she noiselessly stepped to the running board, and snapped a picture.

"I'm starting a collection of bird pictures," she told Sara as they drove on again. "It's a lot more fun hunting them with a camera than with a gun."

"I don't see how anyone could bear to kill a bird such as that lovely white one, Gail."

"Plume hunters threatened to exterminate the egrets for a time. Now it's against the law to shoot them, but it's still done on the sly."

Gail suddenly lifted her foot from the gasoline pedal for, a short distance ahead, half blocking the

narrow road, stood a cream-colored roadster. The right rear tire was flat and a woman knelt in the dust, struggling vainly to jack up the axle.

"A lone lady in distress and miles from a garage," remarked Sara. "I don't envy her."

"We'll stop and try to help," replied Gail, glancing at her wrist watch. "I hate to spare the time, but another car may not come through here today."

The girls drew up at the side of the road and walked toward the cream-colored car.

"Having trouble?" inquired Gail pleasantly.

The woman straightened, brushing dirt from her skirt and gloves. Eyebrows had been plucked to a fine line, giving to her face the expression of a cold China doll. Perspiration had smeared her rouge, bringing into prominence deep furrows at the corners of her painted mouth.

"I didn't stop here for the pleasure of it!" she retorted in response to the question.

"Perhaps we can help you," offered Gail.

"I don't suppose you know any more about changing wheels than I do," the woman replied rudely. "If only a man would come along!"

"Few cars travel this road."

"As if I don't know! I've been stuck here nearly two hours!"

The woman's sharp words annoyed Gail, but she tried to make allowances, realizing that the traveler

was both worried and out-of-sorts. Instead of taking offense, she smiled and reached for the jack handle.

"Here, let me do that," she offered. "There's a trick to it, you know."

"Oh, can you change a wheel?" the woman demanded in an altered tone.

"I'm not sure about this one, but I can on my own car. I would be afraid to venture on this road alone if I couldn't."

"You're welcome to the job." With a sigh of relief, the woman turned the tools over to Gail. Silently she stood watching while the two girls jacked up the axle and changed wheels.

"Is this your first trip into the Everglades?" Gail inquired casually.

"No, it isn't," the woman answered in a curt tone.

"You visited the Indian village, I suppose. It's about the only point of interest along this road."

The woman did not respond. Instead, she said with mechanical politeness: "Thank you for your help. I only wish you had driven along sooner."

Gail's hands and dress were grimy. Considering the amount of work she had done, she felt that the woman might have expressed her gratitude with more warmth. The task had been an unpleasant one and had cost her more than a half hour's time.

"There isn't much air in the spare tire," she said

quietly. "However, I think you should be able to reach Cordell Beach."

The woman started to enter the roadster. With her foot on the running board, she glanced upward and gave a terrified scream.

A huge bird with immense wings flapped slowly over the car. Although the creature was far above her, the woman ducked her head and scrambled for the shelter of the car.

"Horrible!" she shuddered.

"That's only a turkey buzzard," chuckled Gail. "A scavenger of the swamp."

"A buzzard," the woman repeated in revulsion. "Did you see how it circled the car—almost as if it were singling me out! An unlucky omen!"

"You're not superstitious?" Gail asked, slightly amused.

"Certainly not," the woman denied. "But I hate the swamp. I detest ugly, creepy, crawly creatures."

"Then why come where they are?"

Gail's drawled question brought the woman up sharply. She stared at the girl with undisguised suspicion, as if trying to fathom what lay behind her words.

"You are impertinent!" she snapped.

Shifting gears, she drove away in the direction of Cordell Beach.

Gail shrugged. "That's all the thanks we get for

helping her. Actually, though, I didn't intend to insult the woman."

"I fail to understand why she took offense," responded Sara. "Your question was a natural one."

"She considered it prying."

"I wonder who she was and why she really came to the swamp, Gail?"

"I was asking myself the same thing. Queer folks straggle here now and then, and for queer reasons, too!"

The girls walked slowly toward their own car. Sara's gaze roved to the black buzzard roosting comfortably in a nearby cedar.

"Wasn't it funny how frightened she became of that bird!"

"The old fellow was only trying to be friendly." Gail's mouth crinkled into lines of laughter, but her words were seriously spoken. "You know, Sara, I wish he could talk. I think he might tell us that he recognized one of his kind, a fellow scavenger!"

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN OF MYSTERY

"You didn't like the woman, I take it," remarked Sara, smiling at her companion's remark.

Gail started the car and shifted gears before asking laconically: "Did you?"

"No, she seemed hard and ungrateful for our help. Nevertheless, I can't say she reminded me of a turkey buzzard."

"She had a sinister look just as if she were waiting to pounce on live prey," Gail insisted, watching the road between the marshy ditches. "Another thing, didn't you think she kept glancing at you in a peculiar way?"

"I didn't notice it."

"Perhaps I imagined that part. All the same, a woman of her type doesn't venture into the swamp for the fun of it."

"She admitted she hates the place. Why do you think she came?"

Gail shrugged. "Oh, how could I guess? In the past the Everglades have served as hide-outs for crooks."

"She didn't look like one."

"Who knows how crooks look?" countered Gail. "From the pictures I've seen in the papers, often they appear as ordinary people. In fact, they must do everything possible to give that impression so they won't attract the attention of the police."

"Yet you say this woman had a sinister appearance?" Sara teased.

"Oh, it was only a feeling." With a laugh Gail dismissed the entire subject. "No doubt my impressions were highly colored, because I never did enjoy changing a tire!"

The car presently drew near an Indian village. As Gail stopped by the roadside so that Sara might see the thatched-roof houses raised on wooden platforms, a bevy of barefoot children rushed up, whining for money. A sullen-faced squaw hobbled forward, offering bead necklaces and moccasins for sale.

Without making purchases, the girls resumed their journey. Sara remarked that the Indians had not seemed very friendly.

"Oh, the Seminoles have contempt for the tourists," Gail explained. "You know they never were entirely conquered as were other tribes. During the Indian wars they retreated deep into the Everglades, defying pursuit. Now they live their own lives, unmolested, but the race is gradually dying out."

"That squaw who was selling beads gazed at me almost as if I were an enemy instead of a prospective customer."

"It's the Seminole way. Lately the Indians have been more resentful than usual."

"Why is that, Gail?"

"Les Haskins says they've been stirred up because their boats have been stolen. You can't blame them for being resentful. After all, they make most of their living by fishing."

A short distance beyond the village, Gail turned the car into a side road and drew up at its end. Before locking the doors, she removed a camera from the dashboard compartment, slinging the strap over her shoulder.

"I'll take a few pictures while I am here. Yesterday I forgot to bring my camera and I missed some wonderful opportunities."

Gail led her friend along a foot trail which would take them to the Trading Post.

"Watch your step," she warned as they struggled through a tangle of vines and coarse grass. "This is Snake's Paradise."

"I realize now that I shouldn't have insisted upon coming," Sara acknowledged ruefully. "I had an entirely wrong idea of the locality."

Without misadventure the girls reached a clearing not far from the river. There Gail paused to glance carefully about.

"It was somewhere near here that Mr. Allan found the Laughing Mask pin," she told Sara. "I may not be able to show you the exact place."

"It doesn't really matter."

Gail had walked on a few steps ahead of her friend. Noticing footprints in the moist earth she decided that they had been made by Mr. Allan and herself the previous afternoon.

"This must be the place, Sara."

"Why, it looks as if there had been a struggle here!" Sara pointed to the trampled grass and a broken bush.

"It does. But I don't remember the grass being like this yesterday."

Gail suddenly held herself in an attitude of alert listening. Distinctly she had heard retreating footsteps.

Sara, too, became aware of the crunching sound.

"What is that?" she whispered.

Without answering, Gail pushed aside a clump of bushes and ventured into the thicket for a few yards. The grass was trampled in a newly made trail. Plainly she could hear someone running swiftly away, but in a moment all became quiet again. She had seen no one.

Sara joined her. "Gail, was that an Indian?"

"An Indian never would have made so much noise. Whoever it was, we frightened him away."

Sara tugged at her friend's hand. "Come on, Gail. Let's get back to the clearing. It's creepy in here."

"Wait, I'm curious to learn where this new trail leads. You return to the car, Sara. I'll come in a few minutes."

"No. If you're determined to explore, I'll stay with you. But I don't like it here."

Reluctantly Sara followed her friend. The trail curled deeper into the thicket, winding toward the river, but in a different direction than Gail had expected it to take.

The girls walked steadily, hearing no unusual sound, seeing no one. Sara slapped patiently at mosquitoes, but at length complained good-naturedly that she was one solid welt.

"Only a little farther," Gail pleaded. "I think we're coming to something now."

Through the trees they caught a glimpse of water flashing in the sunlight. A moment later they emerged at the edge of a stream.

"This must be a branch of the main river," Gail remarked, gazing curiously about. "Mr. Allan and I never were this way, I'm sure."

Sara stood gazing far downstream at a large, dilapidated, unpainted structure which stood behind a rotting wharf.

"Gail, what is that building?"

"I don't know, Sara. It looks like an abandoned mill."

"Are there many along these waterways?"

"Not in this particular locality. At other places I've seen an occasional cane-mill, fish house or saw-mill."

"That old building—whatever it is—doesn't appear to have been used in a decade."

"Oh, it may not be very old," corrected Gail. "The jungle moves in fast."

She stood staring thoughtfully at the mill, noticing that all windows save one on the upper floor had been boarded up. There was no indication that anyone had visited the place in months, yet it occurred to her that the mysterious person who had attracted their attention, might have vanished inside.

"Wonder who he is, and what he's doing around here?" she mused. Aloud she proposed: "Suppose we cross the river and take a look at that building. I might snap a picture or two."

Farther downstream a log had fallen across the water, and by wetting their shoes a little, they were able to reach the opposite shore.

Upon closer inspection the mill appeared less picturesque, but Gail nevertheless took two front-view pictures of it. In the act of turning the film to the next number, she suddenly glanced up, a startled expression in her eyes.

"Sara, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"It sounded like a door slamming shut!"

"You must have imagined it. I didn't hear a thing."

Gail knew that she had not been mistaken in the sound, although she was uncertain as to its nature.

"You may have heard a bird," suggested Sara. "This old building seems to be a nesting place for them. Just as you snapped your last picture a white pigeon flew to that unboarded window and disappeared up under the ledge."

"Not a pigeon, Sara. Another kind of bird, perhaps, though I didn't see it myself."

"It *was* a pigeon," Sara argued hotly. "You'll learn I am right when you develop your picture."

Gail smiled wisely but did not contradict her friend again. Abruptly walking to the dilapidated building, she tried the door. It was locked.

"Shall we try the back?" she suggested.

"Surely you don't expect to get inside?" Sara demanded, trailing her.

"I wish we could. But it doesn't seem as if we're going to have any luck."

"You think someone may be hiding inside?"

"Well, I was almost positive I heard a door slam."

"And I'm equally sure you didn't," laughed Sara.

"The fact remains that we both heard running footsteps, and a trail led down to the water's edge."

"Yes, that's true," Sara admitted uneasily. "Still, haven't others as much right to be here as we?"

"Of course, but few white persons ever venture

far from the main road. I intend to ask Les Haskins about this place before we return to Cordell Beach."

"Don't you think it might have been the storekeeper we heard?"

Gail shook her head, and made no attempt to explain why she knew Les Haskins was not the one they had followed. The trader never would have acted in such a stealthy manner, and besides, his duties kept him closely confined to the Post during daylight hours.

Testing a rear door and finding it also locked, the girls wandered down to a smaller building at the water's edge.

"This looks like the old boathouse," Gail observed, descending a series of decayed, wooden steps.

The tottering structure leaned at a fifteen degree angle, for a portion of the underpinning had been washed away. An open double door fronted the sluggish stream, and a rickety gallery enabled the girls to venture inside without wetting their shoes.

Save for an old rowboat, half submerged in water and covered with green slime, the room was empty.

"Nothing here," Sara said after a casual glance.

Gail stooped and picked up a handkerchief from the gallery floor. "Not yours, Sara?" she asked.

"Why, no! Where did you get that?"

"Found it just now. This boathouse has had a recent visitor."

"It's so small it must be a ladies' handkerchief, Gail."

"Yes, and notice that it's still fairly fresh and clean. Someone dropped it here in the last few days."

Gail examined the handkerchief carefully, commenting upon the fact that it was made of high quality linen. Finding no identifying mark or initial, she pitched the bit of cloth into the water. As she watched it slowly sink beneath the surface, she made another observation which previously had escaped her.

"Sara, notice those drops of oil on the water!"

"Why, yes, now that you call it to my attention, I do."

"That can mean only one thing! A motor boat has been using this place recently!"

Sara glanced curiously at her companion, unable to fully understand her increasing excitement.

"Well, the boathouse has been deserted," she commented, "I suppose anyone who came this way might feel free to use it."

"Oh, Sara, haven't you a scrap of imagination?"

"Yes, I have plenty of it," Sara replied defensively. "I understand perfectly that all this spells mystery to you."

"It does!" Gail declared, her eyes sparkling. "I ask you, wouldn't this place make a natural hideout for persons seeking to elude the law?"

"Possibly, only the place looks deserted."

"The boathouse has been used. Oh, the situation has all the elements, Sara! A boat stolen from the Indians! A ladies' linen handkerchief—"

"Which might have belonged to your buzzard lady friend," Sara added mischievously.

"Why, that's really an idea!"

"Oh, Gail, I was joking. However, from my standpoint the most interesting clue is that Laughing Mask pin which was picked up in the clearing. I keep thinking about it, wondering if it could have any connection with the threatening letter sent to my father."

"Sara, this mill may have a connection, too! I think we've stumbled into something important! Let's hurry to the Post and ask Les Haskins about this place!"

In a mild frenzy of excitement, Gail whirled around, intending to grasp Sara's hand. Instead, her shoulder struck the rickety railing of the gallery. So suddenly did it give way that she had no chance to recover her balance.

"Help!" she shrieked, arms waving wildly in the air.

Sara leaped forward, but she could not act quickly enough to save her friend. Downward Gail plunged, landing with a great splash in the stagnant water.

CHAPTER IX

AN OLD MILL

THE SHALLOW water came only a little above Gail's waist. Uninjured by the fall, she struggled to her feet, disdainfully trying to rub green scum from her arms and dripping skirt.

"Well, for once I was right," she muttered. "I certainly stumbled into something, and not a mystery either! Am I a mess?"

"You are, Gail." Sara could not keep from laughing. "And the howl you made as you fell! It was enough to wake the dead."

"If anyone is hiding around here I must have announced our presence," Gail replied in disgust, reaching for the hand her friend extended. "I'm so mad I could chew nails!"

With Sara's help she regained the gallery floor, ruefully regarding the gap in the railing.

"It won't take a person with great powers of deduction to guess that someone has been prowling about this boathouse!"

"No, the evidence is fairly apparent," Sara chuckled. "Forgive me for laughing, Gail, but you do look funny!"

"I can imagine!" Gail sprang a knee up and down, causing the water in her shoe to make a squashing sound. "I feel like one of those slick, slimy creatures infesting the bottom of the ocean. Father Neptune with moss in his whiskers has nothing on me!"

"What will you do?" Sara asked anxiously. "You can't ride home as you are."

"I must, unless Les Haskins has some old clothes at the Post. Well, let's move out of here! I've done enough investigating for one day!"

As the girls left the dark boathouse, Gail glanced quickly up and down the river. No boat could be seen, nor was there the slightest indication that any person, suspicious or otherwise, lurked near the abandoned mill. Yet she could not free herself of a conviction that watchful eyes were upon her.

Hurriedly, the girls recrossed the river and returned to the clearing. A short walk from there brought them to the Trading Post. Only a few Indians loitered on the porch, and while Gail's appearance must have surprised them, the expression of their immobile faces did not alter.

Les Haskins was sorting yard goods on a counter at the back end of the store. Hearing the screen door slam, he turned to stare at the girls. For an instant he failed to recognize Gail.

"Don't you know me in my river dress?" she

laughed. "I am what is left of Mr. Allan's secretary!"

"Miss Landreth! I sure didn't expect to see you here again so soon. What happened?"

"I fell in the river. Do you have any old clothes that I could beg, borrow or steal?"

"There ought to be something around here. Let me look."

Finding no garments of his own which seemed suitable, the trader finally offered the girl a new bright red calico dress from his stock of goods. Changing clothing in the back room, Gail mischievously parted her hair in the middle, combing it severely into two braids.

"Me heap big Injun squaw now," she laughed, reappearing in the shapeless garment. "Feelum much better in dry clothes, only shoes go squash, squash."

The trader tossed her a pair of moccasins from the case.

"Now tell me all about this," he commanded. "What were you doing in the river? Chasing alligators?"

"I was investigating a mystery," Gail said with a chuckle. "But first, before I tell my tale of woe, have you and Sara met?"

"Yes, we've been talking. She tells me her father and Mr. Allan are well acquainted."

Gail glanced quickly at Sara, wondering if her

friend had told the trader about Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance. Unless the subject were introduced by the other, she decided to make no mention of it.

"Mr. Allan gave me the day off," she explained, "so Sara and I decided to explore the Everglades together. We had reached the clearing on our way here when I heard someone running through the brush."

"An Indian?"

"I think not, Mr. Haskins. That was what made me curious. Sara and I started to follow, and almost at once struck a trail leading to an old mill."

"A trail?" inquired the trader, frowning.

"The grass had been well trampled down. Anyway, we never did catch up with the person. Instead we came to an old mill with a boathouse."

"I know the place," Haskins nodded. "It was standing there abandoned when I opened my store seven years ago."

"Who owns it, Mr. Haskins?"

"I never heard, but the property isn't worth a nickel."

"The boathouse has been used the last few days."

"What makes you think that?"

"I noticed oil on the water which must have come from a motor boat engine. Then we picked up a ladies' handkerchief lying on the gallery floor.

About that time I crashed through the railing and took a ducking."

"Miss Landreth," the trader said quietly, "you never should have risked going there. In the Everglades some matters are best not investigated."

Gail gazed at him in astonishment. "Then you *do* think that something is wrong?"

"I've not noticed anything out of the way. Once or twice I thought I heard a motor boat on the river at night, but I probably was mistaken."

"Mr. Haskins, isn't it possible that the old mill is being used as a hide-out?"

"Possible, although hardly probable. I'll hike down there tomorrow and take a look around." Deliberately, the trader changed the subject. "I have some news for you. Remember you were showing me a silver pin yesterday afternoon?"

Gail nodded eagerly. "Have you learned anything more about it?"

"A woman who said she was looking for one like it stopped here not more than an hour ago. If you came by car you may have met her on the road."

Gail glanced quickly at Sara. "Not a woman in a cream-colored roadster!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, she was the one. Dark hair and plenty of war paint."

"We helped her change a flat tire," explained Gail.

"Then she asked you about the pin, I suppose?"

"No, she never mentioned it, and neither did we."

"Too bad you couldn't have known who she was, but she'll likely get in touch with you later. I gave her your name and Henry's address."

"Who was the woman, Mr. Haskins?"

"Mrs. Henrietta Deva of Miami."

"And she claimed to be the owner of the pin?"

"Yes, it seems she lost it several days ago when she and her brother were visiting the egret rookery."

"The pin was found not far from the trail leading to the old mill," Gail declared significantly. "That's a long distance from the egret rookery."

"Well, the pin may not be hers. But she described it accurately."

"Oh, undoubtedly it's her property," Gail admitted. "It just seems odd she would expect to find the pin after losing it in such a wild place."

"Mrs. Deva didn't come here especially to inquire about it," explained the trader. "She was buying Indian pottery, and just happened to speak of her loss."

"And she told you she had been here once before visiting the rookery?" Gail questioned thoughtfully.

"Yes, I didn't see her come or go."

"Mrs. Deva scarcely impressed me as a person particularly interested in egrets or nature," remarked Sara. "After all, it could have been her handkerchief we found in the boathouse."

"Exactly what I was thinking," nodded Gail. "Mr. Haskins, that woman may be linked with outlaws who are using the old mill as a hiding place!"

Mr. Haskins smiled tolerantly. "Oh, I hardly judge so."

"I do wish you would walk back there with us now and inspect the building."

"Well, I could if it will make you feel any easier." Mr. Haskins glanced at his watch. "Getting pretty late, though. If you figure on driving to Cordell Beach before dark you ought to be starting."

"That's true," Gail admitted, frowning. "We really shouldn't take the time now."

"I'll drop over there tomorrow and look around," the trader promised carelessly. "How will that be?"

Realizing that their theories had amused rather than alarmed Mr. Haskins, the girls decided to give up the investigation for the time being. However, as he escorted them to the door, Gail asked if Mrs. Deva had explained anything about the significance of the Laughing Mask pin.

"No," the trader replied, "she merely described it as a valuable keepsake."

During the tedious trip home the girls discussed the various happenings of the day. Altering her original opinion, Sara was inclined to share Gail's conviction that Mrs. Deva might be a suspicious character.

"It's unlikely the woman has any connection with

Father's disappearance," she remarked. "And yet one thinks of such a possibility. The design of her Laughing Mask pin certainly resembled the drawing scrawled at the bottom of Father's anonymous letter."

"Too bad the letter was stolen, Sara. I wish I could have seen it."

"I wish so, too. It's beyond my comprehension who could have known I carried it."

"So many strange things have occurred in the past twenty-four hours," Gail remarked moodily. "It seems as if we must have dreamed part of it."

"I know," Sara nodded. "Somehow I can't realize the truth about Father. I keep telling myself he's safe, and that tomorrow I'll find him at one of the hotels."

"Perhaps you will, too, Sara."

"I hope so, but I'm afraid. As soon as I talk with Mr. Allan I may turn the case over to the police. If I wait longer I might never forgive myself."

Sara lapsed into gloomy silence. Worn out from worry and travel, she presently dropped her head on the cushion and fell asleep.

Gail had her own particular set of worries. With the sinking of the sun, darkness came on swiftly. While the engine kept humming smoothly, she had a horror of being stranded on the lonely road.

The air was damp and chilly. Reaching for a

coat, Gail spread it over Sara who stirred and groaned, but slept on.

"Poor kid," she thought. "Sara's been through a lot. I wonder what *has* happened to her father?"

Throughout the day, Gail had talked optimistically, suggesting that Doctor Breckenridge surely would be traced soon. But in her mind there lurked a fear that he might never reappear.

The distant cry of a bird sounded weirdly through the night. Gail shivered and closed the car ventilator against the cold marsh air.

"Old bus, keep going, that's all I ask of you," she muttered. "If I get home safely, I promise I'll have more sense next time."

As far ahead as she could see there was no light save from her own car headbeams, no houses or filling stations. On either side of the road, the great swamp stretched vast and mysterious.

For an hour Gail drove steadily, now and then glancing anxiously at the gasoline gauge. She would have little more than enough fuel to reach Cordell Beach. Although she had not kept an accurate tabulation of the miles traveled, she knew she must be nearing the end of the swamp road.

With a sigh, she stretched her cramped arms and relaxed.

Exactly at that moment there came a break in the steady throb of the motor.

Gail stiffened, her fingers tightening on the steering wheel. The car gave several convulsive jerks, then the motor gave up and the car coasted to a standstill at the side of the road.

CHAPTER X

STRANDED

DESPERATELY GAIL stepped on the starter. Although it whined steadily, the engine would not catch again.

Sara stirred drowsily and rubbed her eyes. "Where are we anyway?" she mumbled.

"Stranded at the edge of the Everglades," Gail answered grimly. "I had a hunch something like this was going to happen."

Thoroughly aroused from sleep, Sara sat up and gazed about in alarm.

"We're not out of gasoline?"

"I don't think so. I'll see."

Taking a stick, Gail measured the gasoline tank and reported that it still held three inches. Sara climbed from the car, huddling beside her companion.

"You don't think we'll be stranded here all night, Gail?"

"I'm very much afraid of it. Oh, we're in a predicament, all right!"

"How far to the nearest place we could get help?"

"Twenty miles at least. No hope that way."

While Sara held a flashlight, Gail lifted the hood and stared hopelessly at the engine.

"Just a mess of wires and cylinders," she complained. "Any one of a dozen things might be broken and I couldn't tell the difference. The only thing I know how to do is to clean spark plugs."

"Why don't you try that?" Sara encouraged.

Finding a small wrench and a wire brush in the tool box, Gail spent nearly an hour working on the six spark plugs. Sara shivered beside her, holding the flashlight and shifting in stork fashion from one weary leg to another.

"Now try it," Gail urged.

Sara slid into the seat behind the steering wheel and stepped on the starter. It gave only a faint wheeze, warning the girls that the battery nearly was exhausted. The motor would not catch.

Thoroughly disgusted, Gail slammed down the engine hood and stamped her foot in the dusty road.

"After covering myself with oil, and burning two of my very best fingers, we're exactly where we were! I'm at the end of my tricks."

"Then why don't we eat?" proposed Sara. "Aren't you hungry?"

"Hungry?" Gail repeated hysterically. "I could eat a raw gar fish without salt!"

"We brought emergency rations with us. If this isn't an emergency I don't know one."

"Do you know, I forgot all about that grub in the

back of the car," Gail chuckled. "We'll not starve at least."

While Sara searched along the road for dry sticks, she dragged a box of supplies from the car. In addition to a thermos bottle of water, it contained a small slab of bacon, crackers, coffee, a frying pan, a blackened coffee pot and a few pieces of charcoal.

Combining the latter with the sticks Sara had gathered, Gail soon had a cheerful little fire blazing at the side of the road. Its warmth and the odor of sizzling bacon lifted her spirits immeasurably.

"This isn't half bad," she remarked, "but I wish we had brought blankets with us. Before morning it's going to be downright cold."

"I'm afraid so," Sara sighed. "Since we can't help ourselves, we may as well make the best of it."

The girls lapsed into silence as they sipped their strong black coffee. There were no stars and the darkness seemed to press in upon them. Now and then the stillness of the night was broken by the hideous cry of a limpkin.

Finishing the bacon, the girls searched diligently for more wood. Very few sticks were to be found. Unable to keep the fire going, they decided to retreat into the car which at least offered protection from the chilling breeze.

Gail replaced the cooking utensils in their box, and was shoving it into the back end of the automobile when her attention was drawn to a moving light

far up the road. As she watched, scarcely daring to hope, it grew brighter, cutting a path through the darkness.

"Sara!" she shouted. "It's a car coming this way! Switch on our lights! Quick!"

Sara groped for the switch, and the headlight beams swept the roadway, giving warning of the stalled automobile.

"If only it stops!" Gail's fingers clenched nervously.

The roar of the oncoming car increased, then suddenly died down as the car slackened. Anxiously the girls huddled together, uneasy at the thought of encountering strangers, yet equally fearful that they might be passed by without an offer of assistance.

The automobile was traveling at high speed. Sara caught only a fleeting glimpse of the driver as it shot past.

"Oh, he isn't going to stop," she wailed, slumping down in the seat.

"Yes, he is!" cried Gail.

Gradually the car slowed down, stopping perhaps thirty yards farther down the road. A man sprang out and hurried toward the girls.

"Having trouble?"

Gail's heart leaped. Laughing aloud in sheer delight and relief, she jumped from the running board and went to meet him. "Mr. Allan! I never was so happy to see anyone in all my life!"

The naturalist drew closer. "Gail, is it really you?" he demanded incredulously. "For a minute I took you for an Indian squaw!"

"I certainly look like one in this outlandish costume," she admitted. "What miracle brought you, Mr. Allan?"

"Mrs. Andon told me that you and another girl had started for the Trading Post alone. When you weren't home by sundown we both were worried."

"I'm sorry to have caused so much trouble," Gail said contritely. "Everything would have been fine if my old wreck of a car hadn't broken down."

"What possessed you to start for the Post by yourselves?"

"It's a long story, Mr. Allan." Gail led her employer to the car where Sara awaited them. "Before I attempt to explain, I have a surprise for you. My fellow adventurer is Sara, Doctor Breckenridge's daughter."

"Sara Breckenridge!" the naturalist echoed in astonishment, reaching to clasp her hand. "I should say I am surprised. Where is your father?"

"I don't know," Sara replied in a voice barely audible. "I came to Cordell Beach alone."

"You did?"

"Mr. Allan, we have a great deal to tell you," Gail interposed quickly. "I've been trying to get in touch with you all day."

"I know. When I returned to the Club at three

o'clock I learned that you had telephoned. Is anything wrong?"

"Just about everything. Sara's father has disappeared, and we're afraid it's serious."

"Doctor Breckenridge has disappeared? Gail, what are you saying? I received a telegram from him yesterday—"

"It was a fake message. We're almost sure of that. Sara and I went to the telegraph office, and the man who sent the message didn't correspond to Doctor Breckenridge's description."

"Sara, where has your father been staying?" Mr. Allan inquired abruptly. "That is, which hotel?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "I've not heard a word from him since he left New York. That's why I came here. I am afraid something dreadful has happened."

Questioned by Mr. Allan, she revealed the most important facts connected with her father's disappearance. Gravely the naturalist listened, offering little comment save to ask if the police had been notified.

"Sara thought she would wait and talk with you before she took such a step," Gail said. "The case has so many complicating angles, and Madam Alexandre is one of them."

"We'll go into this completely," Mr. Allan declared, "but first, let's try to get away from here. What's wrong with your car, Gail?"

"It's a deep mystery to me," she shrugged. "I guess I am as much of a dub at fixing automobiles as Mrs. Deva."

In the act of raising the engine hood, the naturalist straightened, startled by the name. "Mrs. Deva!" He shot a swift glance toward Gail.

"A woman we met on the road this afternoon," Gail explained carelessly.

"Oh, then she talked with you about the Laughing Mask pin?"

It was Gail's turn to stare. "No, she didn't, Mr. Allan. Do you know the woman?"

"I've seen her once or twice. She telephoned the Surf Club this afternoon, inquiring for you. I believe she obtained your name from Les Haskins."

"Mr. Allan, I wish you would tell me everything you know about her," Gail said, and Sara drew closer to hear the reply.

"Well, she telephoned the Club, saying she was the owner of the pin we found in the Everglades. I gave her your address and telephone number."

"You spoke of having seen her a few times."

"Occasionally, with Madam Alexandre at the Club."

"Well, that's certainly interesting!" Gail commented. "So they're good friends!"

"Mrs. Deva acts as secretary and companion to Madam Alexandre," the naturalist corrected. "At least, that's what I've been told."

"Then if the woman is employed by Madam Alexandre she couldn't very well live in Miami!"

"She told you that?"

"No, but she gave Les Haskins to understand she came from there. Something seems to be wrong."

"Oh, Miami may be her original home," Mr. Allan responded, dismissing the matter. "Now let's see what is wrong with this car."

While the girls took turns holding the flashlight, he inspected the engine. Finding a plugged gasoline feed line, he remedied the trouble and Gail was able to start the motor again.

"You and Sara drive on ahead," he directed. "I'll follow in my car."

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the two automobiles pulled into the Andon driveway. Mr. Allan accepted Gail's invitation to come into the house, for he wished to have a long talk with Sara about her father.

Leaving the two with Mrs. Andon, Gail ran upstairs to change her clothing. She had just finished dressing when the telephone rang. Before she could descend to the hallway, Mrs. Andon called:

"It's for you, Gail."

Covering the mouthpiece, the landlady added in a lower tone: "A Mrs. Henrietta Deva. This makes the third time she has called tonight."

Gail went quickly to pick up the receiver.

"Hello, Miss Landreth?" inquired a well modulated voice.

"Yes," Gail replied guardedly.

"This is Mrs. Henrietta Deva," the other continued. "I was told by Mr. Haskins of the Trading Post that you had found a silver pin belonging to me."

"Can you identify the pin, Mrs. Deva?"

"It bore an unusual design—that of a grinning face."

"And a number?" Gail suggested.

"On the back—number twelve." Mrs. Deva spoke eagerly. "The pin is mine and I should like to have it back. Naturally I expect to pay a reward for its return. Shall I call at your home tomorrow?"

"I'll be at work," Gail replied. "I might meet you downtown during the lunch hour."

"Very well. Wherever you suggest."

Gail mentioned the Commodore Hotel which was near Mr. Allan's office. They agreed to meet in the lobby exactly at twelve o'clock.

Hanging up the receiver, Gail returned to the living room where she reported the conversation to Sara and Mr. Allan.

"There was nothing I could do except promise to meet her," she said, frowning. "But I don't like to give up the pin."

Mr. Allan was faintly amused by her attitude.

"Since it is Mrs. Deva's property, what other course is open?"

"None, I guess. I don't wish to keep anything which doesn't belong to me. It's only that I don't trust the woman."

Sara had not yet had an opportunity to tell Mr. Allan about the anonymous letter which had been sent to her father. At Gail's suggestion she repeated the story, and drew a rough sketch of the mask design which had been scrawled at the bottom of the communication.

"Don't you think we have reason to be suspicious of Mrs. Deva?" Gail demanded. "She may be the person who sent the threat to Doctor Breckenridge!"

"As Sara draws the picture it bears a marked resemblance to the design of the pin," Mr. Allan acknowledged reluctantly. "But to say that Mrs. Deva is connected with Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance—fantastic!"

"Fantastic or not, as Madam Alexandre's secretary she must have known about the jade pendant."

"Possibly."

"Madam Alexandre claims that Doctor Breckenridge cheated her. It may be the other way around. She and Mrs. Deva could have schemed to obtain the jade pendant—"

"Now you are talking wildly, Gail."

"Well, maybe I am," she conceded, "but it seems

to me that considering everything that has happened, Mrs. Deva might bear investigation."

"As soon as she obtains the pin, she may vanish," Sara added earnestly. "In that case we never would be able to question her."

The naturalist stared at the floor for a moment. Glancing up, he asked: "What do you have in mind, Gail? I know you've concocted some scheme."

"Not a very good one. However, I hesitate to meet Mrs. Deva tomorrow because she'll recognize me at first glance. Now I thought if you would be willing to take my place—"

"What good would that do, Gail?"

"You're very clever at judging character," she said flatteringly. "After talking with her you could tell what sort of person she really is."

"You over-estimate my powers, Gail."

"Couldn't you tell Mrs. Deva that I had been detained and would give her the pin later? In that way we could keep in touch with her for a while longer without disclosing our suspicions."

"Your suspicions," corrected Mr. Allan.

"Very well, my suspicions. Won't you please do it, just to satisfy Sara and me?"

Mr. Allan hesitated. He glanced at Sara and the silent appeal in her tense, anxious face broke down his reluctance.

"I'll do it," he promised suddenly. "Further-

more, I'll talk with Madam Alexandre and hear what she has to say. Rest assured, we'll leave no stone unturned in gathering information which may explain Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance."

CHAPTER XI

AN UNFORTUNATE INTERVIEW

TRY AS she would, Gail could not keep her mind upon her work the following morning. She kept squirming in her chair, glancing at the clock, wishing that the noon hour would arrive.

Usually an accurate typist, she attempted three times to copy a page of manuscript. In despair she was inserting a fresh sheet of paper under the roller when Mr. Allan spoke from across the room.

"Let it go, Gail. We're neither of us in a mood to do creditable work today."

"I don't know what's the matter with me," the girl confessed. "I'm as jumpy as a cat."

"Thinking about Mrs. Deva?"

"Well, yes, and other matters. Mr. Allan, you talked with police this morning about Doctor Breckenridge?"

"I did, Gail. I've also arranged for a private detective to work on the case. Man by the name of Arley."

"Have you told Sara?"

"Not yet. I thought it would only add to her alarm."

"Then you believe Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance is truly serious?"

"I do, Gail." Henry Allan arose, and walking to the window, gazed down on the rooftop of the Commodore Hotel. "Aside from the fact that the doctor possessed a valuable jewel, he had many bitter enemies."

"Persons who might wish to harm him?"

"I am afraid so, Gail. The nature of Doctor Breckenridge's work in China was such that he stirred up antagonism. On the other hand, I know of no man more highly respected and loved by the people he served."

"He never would have cheated Madam Alexandre as she claims?"

"Such an accusation seems ridiculous, Gail. Utterly so."

"Sara told you the history of the jewel, I suppose?"

Mr. Allan nodded and frowned. "Why Doctor Breckenridge chose to mix into such an affair is beyond my comprehension. The sale of the jewel can bring him no personal profit, only trouble. But then, Chinese relief is a problem very dear to his heart."

"I wonder if he had a right to sell the pendant?"

"Doctor Breckenridge would never knowingly enter into any arrangement which was not strictly honest. However, the controversy over ownership of

the pendant injects a sinister note into the affair."

"Sara is sick this morning," Gail revealed after a lengthy silence. "I left her home in bed."

"Did you call a doctor?" Mr. Allan asked anxiously.

"Oh, it's nothing serious—merely worry. She plans to meet me at the Commodore at a quarter of twelve. We're both eager to learn the outcome of your interview with Mrs. Deva."

"Nothing will come of it, Gail. I promised to talk with her more to satisfy you and Sara than for any other reason."

"Well, in that case, I'll excuse you, Mr. Allan. I shouldn't have made such a request."

"Oh, I don't mind going through with it," he assured her hastily. "Time I am starting, too, if I mean to be on time."

He reached for his hat. Gail quickly lowered her typewriter into its desk compartment.

"Mind if I tag along?" she requested. "It will be interesting to watch from the sidelines."

As they left the office building together, Mr. Allan mentioned that he had gleaned a few facts about Mrs. Deva.

"What did you learn?" Gail questioned eagerly.

"Nothing of much importance. She is a widow whose age the Club gossips variously estimate as anywhere between twenty-eight and forty-eight. Madam Alexandre employed her as a companion

about two weeks ago. They are frequently seen together, and Mrs. Deva lives at Bonniewood."

"Then she deliberately lied to Les Haskins."

Gail and her employer had reached the main entrance of the Commodore Hotel. Before entering they peered into the crowded lobby. It lacked ten minutes of twelve and neither Mrs. Deva nor Sara had arrived.

"Where will you stay?" Mr. Allan inquired. "The gallery?"

"I could go up there, but I won't be able to hear a word."

Gail's wandering gaze focused upon a high wing-back chair which had been placed against a marble pillar. Other vacant chairs stood directly behind the huge post, shielded from view.

"Why wouldn't that wing-chair be an ideal place for me?" she asked. "I'll sit there and bury myself in a newspaper. You maneuver Mrs. Deva to a chair just behind me! Then I'll hear the entire conversation without being seen."

"Any way which suits you," Mr. Allan agreed amiably. "Only find a place before she gets here."

Gail bought a newspaper and seated herself in the wing-chair.

"You haven't given me the Laughing Mask pin," Mr. Allan reminded her.

"Oh, you won't need it," Gail chuckled. "If I gave it to you now you might succumb to the wid-

ow's charms. Just talk with her and make another appointment for me."

"I feel downright foolish," the naturalist grumbled. "How you get me into affairs such as this, I don't know!"

Separating from Gail, he waited where he could keep watch of both entrances. Minutes elapsed and Mrs. Deva did not arrive. Several times the naturalist glanced impatiently at his watch, making rumbling noises in his throat.

"Eight minutes past twelve now," he complained, pacing in front of the wing-chair. "I'll wait exactly five minutes longer. Then if she doesn't come—"

"Main entrance," Gail hissed, hastily raising the newspaper.

Mrs. Deva had entered the lobby. She made an attractive figure in a well-cut tweed coat, and walked with a sprightly step.

The naturalist nervously straightened his tie. He stepped forward, bowing politely.

"Mrs. Deva, I believe?"

She paused, staring at him with an inquiring, almost suspicious gaze.

"What is it?"

"I am Miss Landreth's friend, Henry Allan," he introduced himself hastily. "She was unable to keep her appointment and sent me instead."

"Oh," Mrs. Deva murmured, her face tranquil again, "so she gave the pin to you?"

"Well, no, she didn't," Mr. Allan admitted in embarrassment. "Gail—Miss Landreth asked me to make another appointment."

Mrs. Deva's plucked eyebrows went up and came down in a frown. "This is most annoying for my time is not my own."

"You are employed by Madam Alexandre, are you not?"

Again Mrs. Deva bestowed a sharp glance upon the naturalist. Obviously, she was displeased by the direct question.

"I have seen you with Madam Alexandre several times at the Surf Club," he said quickly.

Mrs. Deva accepted the explanation without comment. "Why was Miss Landreth unable to meet me today?" she asked coldly.

"Well, she is a very busy young person." Mr. Allan shifted his weight uncomfortably. "However, I think I can promise she will keep the next appointment."

"I trust so. The pin is mine, and I must have it back."

Mr. Allan did not particularly like the woman's assured manner. "Are you certain the pin is yours?" he inquired softly. "You haven't seen it?"

"Of course not, but the description tallies perfectly. I know I lost it near the Trading Post."

"Oh, I do not question that the pin is yours," Mr.

Allan said in a soothing tone. "Yet considering the unusual place where it was lost, aren't you fortunate that it was recovered?"

"Are you casting inferences?"

"Inferences? Indeed, no, Mrs. Deva. I merely meant that the swamp is extensive."

"I remembered where I had lost the pin, and when I went back it was not there." Two spots of bright color burned Mrs. Deva's cheeks. "I had been visiting the Trading Post."

"According to Miss Landreth, the pin was picked up some distance from there, at the entrance of a trail leading to the river."

"Oh, yes, I did walk down that way," the woman nodded. Her dark eyes flashed angrily. "Why this lengthy discussion? Perhaps Miss Landreth has decided that she wishes to keep the pin for herself! I thought over the telephone she seemed reluctant to give it up."

"You misjudge her. Miss Landreth has no wish to retain property which does not belong to her."

"She might have kept the appointment," Mrs. Deva said pettishly. "Tell her that I am prepared to pay a reward of fifty dollars. That may serve as an inducement to return the pin."

Mr. Allan was surprised at the amount of the offer, for having seen the trinket he did not consider it worth a fifth of the mentioned sum. Without re-

vealing his thoughts, he suggested that Gail might meet Mrs. Deva the following afternoon.

"If it will be more convenient for you, I am sure she will be glad to call at Bonniewood," he volunteered.

"No, I prefer to meet her here," Mrs. Deva said quickly. "At this same hour. Tell Miss Landreth—"

Her words trailed off. Following the woman's gaze, Mr. Allan saw that she was staring toward the main entrance of the hotel.

In the wing-chair, Gail, surprised at the sudden break in the conversation, cautiously lowered her newspaper. To her dismay she saw that Sara Breckenridge had entered the lobby.

The girl wore her hat at a careless angle, and her face unmistakably was stained by tears. She glanced about the crowded room without seeing Mrs. Deva and Mr. Allan. Instead, her gaze fell upon Gail.

Without comprehending the situation, she hastened to the wing-chair.

"Oh, Gail," she began apologetically, "I didn't mean to keep you waiting, but a dreadful thing happened! Why, what's wrong?"

The next instant she fully understood her friend's consternation. Mrs. Deva stepped from behind the pillar, glaring at the two girls.

"So you were unable to keep the appointment!"

she said to Gail in a cutting tone. "All the while you were here listening!"

"Let me explain," mumbled Gail. "Please—"

But Mrs. Deva did not wait to hear. With an angry toss of her head she walked from the lobby, her spiked heels clipping sharply on the tile floor.

CHAPTER XII

MADAM ALEXANDRE'S DEFENSE

"Now WHAT have I done?" Sara asked in consternation, gazing after the retreating figure. "I didn't see Mrs. Deva until she stepped from behind that pillar! Oh, dear, I've ruined everything."

"Never mind," said Gail, forcing a laugh. "What she thinks of me doesn't matter."

"I never should have walked in so blindly. But I thought the interview surely would be over by this time."

"Mrs. Deva was late in arriving," explained Mr. Allan, joining the two girls. "Sara, have you been crying?"

"You said something dreadful had happened," Gail reminded her anxiously.

"Perhaps I used too strong a word," Sara admitted. "It's just that I've had a disagreeable session with the police. After you left the house, Gail, they came to question me."

"That was to be expected," interposed Mr. Allan. "I talked with them, and they probably wished to check my statements."

"They checked them all right," Sara said grimly.

"I was quizzed for hours. The police seem to think I am hiding information."

"Why should they take such an attitude?" inquired Mr. Allan. "I explained the situation carefully."

"Madam Alexandre made a complaint just as she threatened to do. She swore out a warrant for Father's arrest. Now if ever we do find him, he'll be jailed."

Sara sank into the wing-chair which Gail had vacated, slumping dejectedly. Questioned by Mr. Allan, she repeated much of the interview with the police, leaving no doubt in the minds of her listeners that the case had taken an alarming turn.

"Mr. Allan," Gail said abruptly, "do you think it would do any good if you talked with Madam Alexandre and tried to make her understand the true situation? Possibly you could induce her to withdraw her charge."

"I was considering that very thing, Gail. Yes, I'll go to her estate without delay."

Mr. Allan immediately summoned his car by telephone from the Surf Club, and because he knew the girls were vitally interested, invited them to accompany him to Bonniewood.

"I wonder if we'll meet Mrs. Deva while we are there?" Gail remarked uneasily as the car sped along the boulevard. "It will prove awkward to run into her again after what happened."

"You must return the pin to her, and apologize," Mr. Allan said soberly. "We've both been placed in an awkward position."

"I promise faithfully I'll give up the pin as soon as I see her again. But Mr. Allan, how did she impress you?"

"Well, I hardly know, Gail."

"You didn't like her either!" Gail cried triumphantly.

"I confess her manner was not pleasing."

"Mr. Allan, she has a very special reason for wishing to regain that Laughing Mask pin! Otherwise, why would she have offered such a large reward?"

"It did seem large. Of course, Mrs. Deva treasures the trinket as a keepsake."

"You're making excuses for her."

"No," Mr. Allan denied, "but as yet I am unwilling to agree with you that she is a questionable character."

"Mrs. Deva has made many mis-statements. For instance, she told you she had lost the pin near the Trading Post. Yet she explained to Les Haskins that she had been at the egret rookery."

"Not a very serious mis-statement, Gail."

"Perhaps not. But didn't you think it strange she was afraid to have me visit her at Bonniewood?"

"Quite the contrary, I understand her position. She is employed by Madam Alexandre who prefers not to have the privacy of her home invaded."

With a deep sigh, Gail abandoned the discussion. The car rolled through the gateway at Bonniewood, coasting to a standstill in front of the mansion.

"I'll remain in the car," offered Sara. "It would only infuriate Madam Alexandre to meet me again."

Gail and Mr. Allan presented themselves at the front door. After a wait of several minutes the butler appeared. The servant had not bothered to comb his hair. His fingernails were untidy, and his coat was in need of pressing.

"Madam Alexandre is not receiving callers," he said in a rude tone, without appearing to recognize Gail.

Mr. Allan offered his card. "Madam Alexandre will see me, I think. Please tell her that I am here to discuss the case of Dr. Breckenridge."

The butler's unfriendly attitude did not relax. Ignoring the card, he firmly closed the door in their faces.

"Well, of all the brazen impudence!" Mr. Allan exclaimed wrathfully. "I've a mind to walk in there and teach that fellow a lesson!"

"I shouldn't if I were you," giggled Gail. "You might end up in jail. Headline: 'Noted Naturalist Assaults Butler.' Think what it would do to your lecture tour!"

Still scowling, Mr. Allan turned and walked toward the car.

Gail trailed behind, pausing on the gravel drive-

way. She pointed toward a woman in white who sat at the far end of the garden, reading a magazine.

"There she is now, Mr. Allan!"

The naturalist halted abruptly and glanced in the direction Gail indicated. He, too, saw Madam Alexandre seated beneath the lime tree, her back toward them.

"We'll talk with her," he said determinedly. "She can't very well elude us now."

As Gail and Mr. Allan started across the lawn, Madam Alexandre saw them approaching. She arose from the bench and, unable to retreat gracefully, drew herself into a haughty pose. However, upon recognizing the girl she smiled faintly.

Even this slight sign of friendliness faded when Gail presented Mr. Allan and explained why they had come.

"Excuse me, I do not wish to discuss Doctor Breckenridge or my unfortunate business relations with him," she said frigidly. "The man deliberately robbed me!"

"I hope to convince you otherwise," replied Mr. Allan. "I have known the doctor for many years and—"

"And you are naturally prejudiced," Madam Alexandre completed. "Please—I have no desire to hear more."

"Perhaps I am prejudiced," Mr. Allan admitted

quietly. "I have heard only Sara Breckenridge's side of the story. Won't you tell me yours?"

Madam Alexandre considered a moment, but replied stiffly:

"I see no reason for doing so, Mr. Allan. I have never aired my private affairs."

The naturalist refused to accept defeat. Assuring Madam Alexandre that anything she chose to tell him would be regarded in strict confidence, he suggested that he might be able to help recover the lost money or the jade pendant.

Rather impressed by the appeal, Madam Alexandre motioned for Gail and Mr. Allan to seat themselves on the stone bench.

"There's little to tell," she said. "For some months I corresponded with a Chinese gentleman, Tsu Wan, regarding the purchase of the pendant. Finally I received word that the transaction could be completed and that Doctor Breckenridge would bring the jewel to this country."

"You were purchasing the pendant without having seen it?" Mr. Allan inquired in surprise.

"Oh, I saw it years ago while in China." Madam Alexandre's thin face became momentarily animated. "At that time I made up my mind that some day I should have it for my own. Never have I gazed upon such beautiful jade, translucent—"

Deliberately breaking off, she continued in a mat-

ter-of-fact tone: "As an initial payment to bind the transaction I was required to pay five thousand dollars. This amount was sent to Doctor Breckenridge when he reached New York. I have heard nothing from him since. A cable to Tsu Wan has gone unanswered."

"But all this does not necessarily prove that Doctor Breckenridge defrauded you," returned Mr. Allan. "It is far more likely, in my opinion, that he met with violence."

Madam Alexandre's lips curled. "I cannot accept such a theory. The transaction was conducted secretly."

"You may not know that a short time before he left New York Doctor Breckenridge received a threatening letter warning him that he must not dispose of the jewel."

"A letter? What authority have you for such a statement."

"Sara Breckenridge."

"Oh, I see." Madam Alexandre smiled scornfully. "Of course, you did not examine the letter?"

"No, it was stolen from Sara's suitcase after she reached Cordell Beach."

"Really, Mr. Allan—" Madam Alexandre waved her hand in a depreciatory gesture. "—you are naive to place faith in that girl's story."

"You forget that I knew Doctor Breckenridge for many years and respected him. In fairness to his

daughter I ask you to withdraw your charge before the news reaches the newspapers."

Madam Alexandre frowned in annoyance.

"The publicity will be equally distasteful to me, Mr. Allan. I took the step only after careful deliberation. I cannot withdraw my charge."

"Suppose I should guarantee that you will not lose your five thousand dollars?"

"The loss of the jewel annoys me even more than the money," Madam Alexandre declared pettishly. "I cannot allow anyone to settle the debt. Doctor Breckenridge must be sent to prison if the police are able to apprehend him."

She arose, a signal that there was nothing more to say.

During the entire conversation Gail had remained silent. Now she sprang to her feet, and without considering her words, inquired abruptly:

"Madam Alexandre, do you remember the Laughing Mask pin you tried to buy from me?"

"Certainly I remember it."

"Well, I have found the owner."

"Indeed? Who, may I ask?"

"Mrs. Henrietta Deva."

The name startled Madam Alexandre. She repeated it softly and then added: "Oh, you must be mistaken!"

"No, the pin belongs to her," Gail insisted. "I should like to return it now if she's here."

Madam Alexandre hesitated, her gaze roving toward the house.

"Mrs. Deva is away for the day. You may give it to me."

Gail shook her head. "If you don't mind, I prefer to take care of the matter myself. You see, I have an apology to offer her."

"Suit yourself, my dear."

Madam Alexandre shrugged, but her eyes flashed angrily. She had accepted Gail's refusal as an affront.

The woman made no response to Mr. Allan's courteous words of farewell. Barely inclining her head, she stood like a marble statue, watching as the pair crossed the lawn toward the waiting car.

Well beyond hearing, Gail remarked that the call had not been very successful.

"Mr. Allan, weren't you surprised that she turned down your offer to make good the five thousand dollars?"

"Well, yes I was," the naturalist acknowledged. "However, I've been told Madam Alexandre has more money that she can use."

Gail's gaze swept the untidy lawn, the house which was fast falling into a state of decay.

"This doesn't look as if Madam Alexandre possessed a fortune! The inside of the house is shabby, too."

"I'll admit the place has no air of prosperity," Mr.

Allan replied. "But then, the woman is eccentric."

It seemed to Gail that her employer was making excuses for Madam Alexandre, even as he had tried to explain Mrs. Deva's strange conduct. She distrusted both women. Not only did they live together, but they shared an interest in the Laughing Mask pin.

"They're as alike as two peas," she thought. "Hard and selfish. If one is involved in underhanded doings, I'll venture they both are."

Gail was puzzled because Madam Alexandre had seemed unaware that Mrs. Deva rightfully owned the Laughing Mask pin. While it was quite possible she had merely acted a part, her surprise had seemed genuine.

"Mr. Allan, did you think Madam Alexandre was eager to gain possession of my pin?" she questioned thoughtfully.

"Why, no, it was natural for her to make the offer she did," he replied. "You offended her."

Gail drew a deep sigh. "I suppose so, but I couldn't help distrusting her. She surrounds herself with such queer people. Take that butler, for example."

Before Mr. Allan could speak, the low hum of a motor caused them both to glance toward the main highway. A taxi rolled into the private grounds and, passing the parked limousine, stopped in front of the house.

Immediately a woman in a tweed coat came from the residence, followed by the butler who carried her traveling bag.

"Mrs. Deva!" exclaimed Gail, stopping short. "And Madam Alexandre told us she wasn't here!"

The woman entered the cab. She spoke a few words to the butler and handed him a sealed letter.

Realizing that the cab was about to pull away, Gail darted forward. Rapping on the window she cried:

"Oh, Mrs. Deva! I have your pin now!"

The woman turned a startled face toward the girl but did not roll down the window.

Gail fumbled in her purse for the silver trinket. Finding it, she held it up in plain view. Mrs. Deva gave the pin only one swift glance.

"It isn't mine after all," she said, signaling the driver. "Sorry to have troubled you."

The car rolled away and Gail was left standing alone.

CHAPTER XIII

INFORMATION FROM JENNINGS

THE TAXI swung down the curving drive and, making a right hand turn beyond the gate, headed toward Cordell Beach. Gail glanced about for the butler but he had disappeared into the house. With a bewildered shake of her head, she rejoined Mr. Allan.

"Well, after that, nothing will surprise me," she remarked.

"Mrs. Deva refused the pin, didn't she, Gail?"

"Yes, she said it wasn't hers, yet she scarcely glanced at it."

"Still angry, I suppose."

"She acted frightened to me. I'll venture she's leaving town! And why did Madam Alexandre tell us the woman wasn't here?"

"I don't know," Mr. Allan admitted thoughtfully. "I'll grant you, Mrs. Deva's actions are mystifying."

Sara waited impatiently for Gail and Mr. Allan to reach the car. As they approached, she swung open the door for them.

"You saw Mrs. Deva drive away?" she demanded,

and went on hurriedly: "I think she left because we came here!"

"Because of us!" Gail exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, shortly after you and Mr. Allan went to the front door, I saw a woman gazing out of a window at this car. Then it wasn't ten minutes until she came from the house, carrying a suitcase. She handed something to the butler which looked like a letter. They talked for a minute and she drove away in the cab."

"She noticed you sitting here?"

"Oh, I am sure of it, Gail, although she never glanced toward me. I think she's leaving town!"

Gail turned to Mr. Allan, her face tense with excitement.

"Aren't we making a mistake to allow Mrs. Deva to get away from Cordell Beach?"

"How can we prevent it, Gail?" Mr. Allan asked, looking troubled. "We haven't any evidence against her."

"Couldn't we have her questioned by the police?"

"Upon what charge?"

"Well, I don't know, I guess it wouldn't do," Gail admitted slowly. "But it might be worth while to learn where she's going. Then later on she could be traced if the occasion arose."

Making up his mind suddenly, Mr. Allan jumped into the car. Slamming the door, he said tersely to the chauffeur:

"Overtake that cab if you can, Jennings!"

The palm-lined boulevard leading from Bonniewood to Cordell Beach had few bends. Ignoring the side roads and the possibility of lurking highway police, Jennings drove fast, passing car after car. Just before reaching the city limits, Mr. Allan caught a glimpse of the cab they pursued.

"Slow down, Jennings," he warned. "We'll keep well behind from now on."

The cab threaded its way through downtown traffic at a leisurely speed, presently drawing up before the terminal railroad station. Jennings parked the Allan car across the street.

Mrs. Deva alighted from the taxi. As she gazed about for a porter, a boy in uniform separated himself from a group of other redcaps, darting forward to seize the woman's suitcase. His eagerness made it evident that he knew her and anticipated a generous tip.

"Sara, are your eyes sharp enough to read the number on that boy's cap?" Gail asked.

"It looks like fourteen to me."

Waiting until Mrs. Deva had vanished into the station, Gail reached for the door handle, intending to follow. Mr. Allan placed a detaining hand on hers.

"If you enter the depot now Mrs. Deva will be sure to see you. Why not send Jennings?"

"Why, of course!" Gail exclaimed. "I never

thought of that! She's not likely to recognize him."

The chauffeur was instructed to enter the station and, without attracting Mrs. Deva's attention, observe her movements.

"Number 6, south bound, is due to arrive in ten minutes," Mr. Allan commented, glancing at his watch. "Mrs. Deva probably will take that train. Try to learn her destination, Jennings."

"Yes, sir." Tipping his cap politely, the chauffeur disappeared into the station.

Minutes passed and Jennings did not return. Number 6 arrived and departed. Still there was no sign of him. Gail and Sara fretted at the delay, speculating upon why it took him so long.

At last, however, the man reappeared, walking with a deliberate, unhurried gait.

"I don't believe he learned a thing," Gail muttered beneath her breath. "I wish we had gone ourselves."

"Jennings is very methodical and thorough," replied Mr. Allan, smiling. "Often he surprises me."

Gail and Sara were the ones to receive the surprise, for Jennings bowed politely and said:

"I learned that Mrs. Deva bought a one-way ticket to Oronto."

"Oronto?" repeated Gail thoughtfully. "Isn't that a small town somewhere near here?"

"Oronto is located on the seacoast, Miss. Forty-seven miles from here."

"That's not so far," Gail mused. "Somehow I had a notion that Mrs. Deva would try to get out of the state."

"What else did you learn, Jennings?" questioned Mr. Allan.

"I talked with the porter who carried Mrs. Deva's luggage to the train, sir. She gave him a dollar tip. The last time he received two dollars, which explained his eagerness to serve her."

"The last time?" Gail caught him up eagerly.

"Mrs. Deva came to the station several days ago. I failed to learn whether or not she arrived on a train. According to the boy, she had checked her suitcase in a mechanical device and then had lost the key. She gave him two dollars for helping her open the lock."

"Why, it may have been Mrs. Deva who opened my suitcase!" cried Sara. "Jennings, you didn't find out what compartment was entered?"

"Oh, yes, Miss. Number 28."

"That was the compartment where I had my suitcase checked!" Sara exclaimed. "Then Mrs. Deva must have been the person who searched my luggage and stole the letter!"

"I knew she was a suspicious character from the first moment I saw her!" declared Gail triumphantly. "Did you learn anything more, Jennings?"

"I regret that was all, Miss Landreth."

"You did very well," praised Mr. Allan dryly.

"I should say so," echoed Gail with emphasis. "I declare, Jennings, you've missed your calling. With your talent you should be a detective!"

"Oh, no, Miss," he returned, taking her seriously. "I prefer to drive a car."

Again Mr. Allan looked at his watch. It lacked but fifteen minutes of two o'clock, the hour he was scheduled to lecture at the Women's Club. To keep the appointment he must leave without delay.

"I am afraid I'll not be able to take you girls anywhere," he apologized.

"Don't bother about us," Gail said quickly. "Any instructions for the day?"

"Send a telegram to the Town Club at Miami canceling my engagement there tomorrow. I won't return to the office, so you may have the remainder of the afternoon off."

"I suppose there's nothing to be done about Mrs. Deva," Gail said reluctantly, following Sara from the car.

"Immediately after my lecture I'll talk with the police," Mr. Allan promised. "It's barely possible she may have a record."

After the car had driven away, Sara and Gail walked slowly down the street in search of a telegraph office. They were somewhat gratified to realize that events had brought a change in Mr. Allan's attitude toward Mrs. Deva. He, too, now regarded the woman with distrust.

"I do hope Mr. Allan isn't canceling his lecture engagement because of me," Sara remarked uneasily.

"Oh, he was looking for a good excuse to stay at home," Gail returned. "Anyway, I don't blame him for not wishing to leave at this time."

"You've both been so kind and helpful. If it weren't for your encouragement I simply couldn't keep going."

Sara's voice broke with emotion. Gail reached for her hand and squeezed it comfortingly.

"Everything will turn out all right. Your father will be found, and Madam Alexandre's charges won't be pressed."

"If only I could believe that, Gail. But I can't. I—I'm afraid Father may be dead."

"Oh, Sara, you are taking a gloomy attitude. The police will have news to report soon."

"I place no faith in them. From the sharp way they questioned me this morning, I know they have accepted Madam Alexandre's story in preference to my own."

Coming to a park bench the girls sat down, and Gail tried to cheer her friend. Earnestly they discussed the scattered clues in their possession.

"It does seem to me that Mrs. Deva may know something about Father's disappearance," Sara declared in a more spirited tone. "After hearing Jennings report, I certainly believe she stole my letter!"

"But what use would she have for it?"

"I can't guess, Gail. Nevertheless, she did act queer about the Laughing Mask pin, so the letter might have interested her, too."

"I believe she took it," Gail nodded. "But what puzzles me is this. If Mrs. Deva was frightened away from Cordell Beach why didn't she go farther than Oronto?"

"Perhaps she only went there on business for Madam Alexandre and expects to return," Sara ventured doubtfully.

Gail shook her head, a tiny frown crinkling her forehead. While she could not have explained her reason, she did not believe that Mrs. Deva would be seen in Cordell Beach again. The suitcase indicated that she had taken her belongings. Then, too, her hasty departure following the hotel interview rather suggested that she might have been frightened away.

"If Mrs. Deva is afraid, it must be because she's mixed up in some underhanded affair," Gail said aloud. "And that naturally takes one back to the Everglades. Sara, we should have investigated that old mill more thoroughly!"

"I wish we could go back there today."

"Oh, we couldn't start this late. Besides, I promised Mr. Allan I wouldn't go there alone again." Gail's face suddenly brightened. "But I have another idea!"

"What, Gail?"

"Why not drive to Oronto? The roads are good all the way. Even my old bus should be equal to the trip."

"We might be able to learn why Mrs. Deva went there!"

"Exactly." Gail pulled Sara to her feet. "Even if we learn nothing, the trip should be a pleasant one."

"All right," agreed Sara.

Losing no time, the girls hastened to a telegraph office where Gail sent Mr. Allan's message. That duty out of the way, they caught a bus which took them within a block of Mrs. Andon's home.

"Gail, do you figure Mrs. Deva and Madam Alexandre may be working together?" Sara asked thoughtfully, as the girls alighted from the conveyance.

"I hadn't thought so until today," Gail replied slowly. "Now I confess I am completely bewildered. I can't understand why Madam Alexandre would deliberately lie unless she wished to shield Mrs. Deva."

"Do you know what occurred to me?" Sara broke in eagerly. "Madam Alexandre may have schemed to get the jade pendant without paying for it!"

"Didn't she give your father five thousand dollars as she claims?"

"I have no absolute proof she sent the money—only her word."

"That does throw a slightly different light upon the situation," Gail said reflectively. "I remember the first time I ever saw Madam Alexandre she did a queer thing."

"And what was that?"

"Mr. Allan threw away a telegram—the fake message supposedly sent by your father. Well, she maneuvered to read it, or at least I think she did."

"She also tried to obtain the Laughing Mask pin from you, Gail. Oh, I am satisfied those two women are in this together!"

The girls had reached the Andon residence. As they cut across the lawn, a man slipped quietly around the side of the garage, disappearing into the bushes. Neither Gail nor Sara observed him, for they were engrossed in their conversation. While they noticed that the garage doors stood ajar, they assumed the oversight had been their own.

"I must have left them that way," Gail said carelessly. "I really should reform."

She backed the car into the driveway. Sara dutifully closed the garage doors and climbed in beside her friend. At that moment a police cruiser drew up in front of the Andon home.

"Look!" Sara exclaimed, grasping Gail's arm with a pressure which hurt.

In dismay the girls saw that they could not reach the street without passing near the cruiser.

"Do you suppose those policemen are here to question you?" Gail asked uneasily.

"I'm sure of it," Sara answered with a groan. "Oh, dear, this will mean the end of our trip to Oronto. Isn't there some way I can escape them?"

CHAPTER XIV

A STRANGE BIRD

"CROUCH DOWN in the bottom of the car," Gail advised impulsively. "Maybe they won't see you."

Sara obeyed with alacrity and the automobile rolled down the driveway toward the street.

A policeman stepped from the cruiser, waiting.

Gail pretended not to see him, but instantly she divined that he intended to stop her. Too late, she realized that should Sara be found in hiding, questions were certain to have an unpleasant edge.

The policeman held up his hand, ordering the girl to halt.

Deliberately Gail allowed the automobile to coast well beyond the officer before applying brakes. Then without giving him time to approach, she sprang out and ran to meet him.

"You wanted to see me, Officer?" she asked innocently.

He gave her a quick, appraising glance. "Not particularly. I thought you were another girl who lives in this house."

"Sara Breckenridge?"

"Yes. Know her?"

"She's a very good friend of mine. Tell me, have you learned anything about her father?"

"We haven't been able to trace him yet," the policeman replied briefly. "Know where the Breckenridge girl is now?"

"Have you inquired of Mrs. Andon?" Gail asked evasively.

"We were here earlier in the afternoon. The landlady said the girl had gone away somewhere."

"Oh, I see. Is it important that you find her?"

"We want to take her to the station for questioning."

Gail instantly decided that she would not betray Sara. She felt that the girl was in no mental condition to withstand a long and tiring inquisition.

"You might try the railroad station," she said. "Sara went there about a half hour ago."

Thanking her for the information, the policeman returned to the cruiser. Without taking a second glance at the other car where Sara crouched, he drove away.

Gail drew a deep sigh of relief. However, her conscience gave her a tiny twinge as she realized she had sent the men upon a useless search.

"Oh, well," she consoled herself, "policemen are supposed to be smart. He should have asked his questions in a different way."

Returning to the car she advised Sara that it was safe to come out of hiding.

"That was a narrow escape," Sara laughed, stretching her cramped limbs. "What did those men want?"

"It was as you suspected. They planned to take you to headquarters for questioning."

"For some reason they seem to think I am withholding information," Sara replied bitterly. "It's lucky they didn't catch me hiding!"

"I had visions of being charged with harboring a criminal myself," Gail chuckled.

Climbing into the car, she steered down the street, away from the railroad terminal. Once safely beyond the city limits, she stopped to consult a road map. Satisfied that she had taken a route which led to Oronto, she then settled down to steady driving.

"Perhaps I made a mistake running away," Sara remarked uneasily. "After all, I should try to help the police, not hamper their work."

"You've already told them everything you know. I'm sure this trip will prove more profitable than answering the same old questions over again. We may succeed in tracing Mrs. Deva."

Gail squinted to protect her eyes from the bright glare of the pavement. Although she did not attempt to put her thoughts into exact words, she cherished a belief that the woman might have had a direct connection with Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance.

"It isn't likely Mrs. Deva is working alone," she reflected. "Undoubtedly there are others."

Into Gail's mind came a mental picture of the sullen butler she had met at Bonniewood. While she had no particular reason to distrust him, the man had impressed her most unfavorably. His untidy appearance, impolite manner, careless bearing, suggested that he had never received training as a servant.

"When Mr. Allan mentioned Doctor Breckenridge's name, he slammed the door in our faces," she recalled. "That may have had special significance."

Directly ahead, traveling at slow speed, was a truck laden with empty orange crates. The driver, an aged colored man, occupied more than his share of the road.

"Look out!" Sara suddenly cried.

With a start, Gail emerged from her day dream. She slammed on the brake and tooted the horn. Barely avoiding a smash-up, she swerved around the left side of the vehicle.

"Another lapse like that and we'll both wake up in the hospital," she laughed shakily.

During the next half hour Gail paid strict attention to her driving, sternly keeping her attention upon the road. Before long they followed the curve of the ocean, deep blue beneath a turquoise sky.

Not far from shore a few sail boats tacked back and forth, while beyond, a tramp steamer plied its way through a marked channel to the harbor.

"Oronto?" Sara inquired as white buildings towered ahead.

"Yes," Gail nodded. "It's a winter resort."

The car rattled over a long steel bridge into an avenue of royal poinciana trees. Few persons were to be seen on the streets for the afternoon was unusually warm.

"What shall we do now we're here?" Sara asked. "Mrs. Deva's train must have arrived long ago."

"Let's drop around at the station anyway. We may be able to learn if she actually got off here."

From a colored man who was trimming a hedge, Gail inquired the way to the railroad, and learned it was only three blocks distant.

The station, a garish building of pink stucco, appeared deserted save for a loiterer who sunned himself by the doorway. Entering, Gail and Sara walked to the ticket window.

"Yes?" inquired the station agent, spearing a yellow paper on a spindle.

"Has the train from Cordell Beach arrived yet?" Gail asked hesitantly.

"Number 6 pulled out of here forty minutes ago. There isn't another train until ten o'clock tonight. Expecting someone?"

"Well, yes, we were," Gail admitted. "A dark-

haired woman wearing a tweed coat and a white felt hat. Did you notice whether or not she got off here?"

"Two or three passengers arrived, but I didn't pay much attention to them." The agent resumed his work.

As the two girls were turning away in disappointment, the man who stood near the door, addressed them.

"Lookin' fer a lady in a tweed coat? I seen her get off."

"You did?" Gail questioned eagerly.

"A man met her. They went away together in a cab."

"Oh, a man met her," Gail murmured, glancing at Sara. "Can you describe him?"

"I ain't no good at that, but he was a yachtsman I guess. Leastwise, he had on a blue jacket and one o' them peaked caps."

Unable to obtain additional information of value, Gail and Sara returned to the car, there to discuss their next move.

"If it's true Mrs. Deva was met by a ship's officer or a yachtsman, it may be she intends to board a boat!" Gail declared. "Possibly a privately owned one!"

"Should we notify the police?"

"I wish I dared, Sara, but we haven't one bit of real evidence against her."

"That's true. Still, we just can't let her get away! What do you advise?"

"Why not drive down to the bay and do a little inquiring there?" Gail proposed after a moment. "If we're lucky we may run into someone who has seen Mrs. Deva. Oronto isn't a very large city."

A wide boulevard, bordered by a park, led past three large beach hotels to the docks. Abandoning their car near a warehouse, the girls walked slowly along the waterfront.

There was little activity, for no freighters were being loaded or unloaded. A few small fishing vessels tugged at their ropes. In the deeper water a freshly painted yacht lay at anchor, her decks quite deserted.

Gail noticed an old man who sat some distance away, feet dangling over the edge of the dock. Puffs of tobacco smoke appeared above his head with the regularity of a machine.

"Let's amble over and talk with him," she suggested.

As the girls drew near they observed that their intended acquaintance was a saltish looking old fellow who evidently had come out to sun himself and absorb some of the sea. He wore ragged but clean clothing. His tanned face was wrinkled by winds that long since had ceased to blow; he pulled away at a corncob pipe with deep satisfaction.

"Good afternoon," said Gail, pausing.

The old man took his eyes from the sea and fastened them on the girls.

"Good afternoon, young 'uns." He turned his head again to gaze at the tumbling waters.

"What do you see out there that is so interesting?" Gail asked as the sailor continued to remain oblivious to their presence.

"See that boat?"

"You mean the yacht?" Gail inquired, following the sailor's gaze. "That white one?"

"She's the one. That there old tub is mighty interestin' to me, bein' an old sailor."

"It's a pretty boat," commented Sara politely.

"That's all a land lubber can tell," the sailor retorted. "Yonder vessel may have a pretty coat of paint, but if you was to take a peek beneath her water line, you'd see she ain't sound. She leaks like a sieve and she's had engine trouble. Fact is, I think she's still havin' it."

"Do you know who owns the yacht?" Gail asked, studying the vessel with new interest.

"Ain't nobody 'round here knows who owns her now," the old sailor answered, puffing at his pipe. "She used to be the *Pelican*, built special for a man who was run in for smugglin'. Since then she's had her name changed, and two or three different owners."

"The boat is used for pleasure now, I suppose?"

The old sailor knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"There's some as says she ain't. For six days now she's been lyin' at anchor, and not a man has had shore leave. The skipper keeps his crew cooped up like they was bound for Devils Island."

By this time the girls were deeply interested, hoping that the strange yacht might have some connection with Mrs. Deva's presence in Oronto.

"That boat ain't the only queer thing I've seen here," the old sailor went on. "I've sailed the seven seas, and if there had been ten of 'em instead of seven, I'd have sailed them, too, in my day. But this I never saw—a sea gull that flies straight like a bullet."

Gail and Sara exchanged a puzzled glance, each wondering if the old fellow might not be a bit foolish.

"Is there such a bird?" Sara asked.

The old sailor nodded as he puffed at his pipe.

"I see him every night about sundown. He shoots straight ahead like one of them fighter airplanes you see pictured in the newspapers."

"I thought gulls floated about rather lazily," Sara remarked.

"This here fellow don't do no foolin' around. And always he flies in the same direction, just a mite Southeast from where we're a settin'."

"Not toward the yacht?" asked Gail thoughtfully.

The sailor nodded, smiling at her in a quizzical, sly way, as if enjoying his own private joke.

"That's his destination I figure," he said, "but why a gull would be makin' evenin' calls on a stranded boat is mor'n I ever learned at sea."

The merry twinkle in the old salt's watery blue eyes warned Gail that he might be having fun at her expense, yet there was an implication to his words which caused her to take thought.

"Are you quite sure the bird is a gull?" she asked doubtfully.

Stuffing the corncob pipe into a convenient pocket, the old sailor laboriously pulled himself to his feet.

"It ain't wise to be sure about nothin' these days," he remarked. "But if you're interested in that there strange bird, just keep watchin' sharp and he'll come flyin' along. It's nearin' sundown."

Nodding in a friendly manner, the old man walked away with a rolling, swaggering stride.

"He was making fun of us!" Sara muttered when the sailor was beyond hearing.

Gail, her eyes upon the retreating figure, shifted them to the yacht at sea.

"I think he may have been trying to tell us something," she said gravely. "Let's wait and watch."

CHAPTER XV

WATERFRONT

ALREADY THE heat of a Florida afternoon had abated. A cool breeze from the sea blew inshore, bathing the land with a refreshing breath as from far away fields of ice.

The girls shivered, for it was cooler still in the shadow of the warehouse.

"What do you think that old sailor meant?" Sara asked curiously, as her friend continued to gaze toward the distant yacht.

"It struck me he might have been hinting that the mysterious gull really is a carrier pigeon," Gail responded. "That's why I should like to wait and watch."

"A carrier pigeon! Maybe that is what he meant! Let's do wait, Gail."

Seating themselves on the edge of the dock, the girls kept close watch of the sky. Gulls soared gracefully overhead, now and then dipping into the water. However, no bird appeared which answered the old sailor's description.

The sun, changing from a ball of fire to a great golden globe, gradually dropped lower until it

slipped beneath the rim of the sea. Shadows deepened. The girls became uncomfortably cold.

"In another fifteen minutes it will be dark," Sara declared, losing patience. She arose and massaged stiffened neck muscles. "That old sailor must have been playing a joke on us."

"We could have failed to see the bird."

"I've scarcely taken my eyes from the sky, and neither have you. The only birds have been those stupid old gulls."

"Let's wait a few minutes longer."

"Very well," Sara sighed, "but it will do no good. You'll see."

Another ten minutes elapsed, and the sky became so dark that flying birds no longer could be discerned. Reluctantly Gail admitted that it was useless to remain longer.

"I guess that old fellow was having fun at our expense," she acknowledged irritably. "Still, he didn't act like it. And he was watching the yacht even before we approached him."

As Gail spoke her eyes roved once more toward the *Pelican* which now was showing lights. Suddenly she stiffened into attention. A dinghy, barely discernible, was being lowered from the vessel to the water.

"Someone must be coming ashore," she remarked, drawing Sara's gaze to the yacht.

Within a few minutes the girls unmistakably

could hear the rhythmical dipping of oars. Yet the boat no longer was visible in the gathering darkness.

Deciding that it must be heading farther down shore, they deserted their post, walking until they could again see the dinghy. A man sat with his back to them, rowing steadily but with a jerky stroke which disclosed he was no sailor.

Not wishing to be observed, the girls retreated behind the corner of an old shed. Soon they heard a heavy thud as the dinghy struck the dock. A man climbed out, tossing a painter around the dock post and knotting it awkwardly.

As he turned, Gail caught an impression of a fleshy, round face accentuated by a prominent hooked nose.

"Ever see him before?" she whispered.

"No, I am sure I never did," returned Sara. "He probably works aboard the *Pelican* or whatever they call the yacht now."

"He doesn't act like a sailor and he's not wearing a uniform," Gail pointed out. "Another thing—I wonder why he waited until nightfall before leaving the yacht?"

She said no more, for the man was walking straight toward the warehouse. With presence of mind, Gail bent down, pretending to tie a shoe lace. Sara lowered her head.

Rounding the corner of the shed, the man abruptly halted. The unexpected appearance of the

two girls had startled him. However, when they did not glance up, he moved hurriedly on, paying them no heed.

The man turned into an alley some distance away, looking back over his shoulder as if to make certain he was not being followed.

"Sara, wouldn't you say that fellow acts as if he's afraid someone might trail him?" Gail demanded in a low tone.

"Well, I don't know," Sara replied doubtfully. "He glanced at us rather sharply. But no doubt any other person would have done the same."

"I wish we could learn why he came ashore. That old sailor seemed to think something was wrong aboard the *Pelican* and so do I!"

"You don't believe Mrs. Deva could be connected with those folks on the yacht?"

"Why not, Sara? She left the railroad station with a man who apparently was a yachtsman. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if she's aboard the *Pelican* now."

"In that case she'll get away and the police never will question her."

"She won't escape if we're able to gather evidence against her. The *Pelican* can't sail with a disabled engine."

"Probably that's why someone was sent ashore," Sara speculated. "To purchase parts or contact repairmen."

"At this time of night?"

"Then how do you explain it?" Sara countered.

"I don't, but I wish we could learn where that fellow is going. Let's follow him."

"All right," Sara reluctantly agreed, "only I don't enjoy exploring in this part of the city."

She need have felt no uneasiness, for already they had delayed too long to take up the pursuit. By the time they reached the alley entrance, the man was nowhere to be seen. Nor were they able to pick up his trail.

Although they walked through the alley to its far end, they saw no one. Adjoining streets were deserted.

"I can't understand where he went so quickly," Gail said in annoyance. "He may have entered one of the warehouses."

On either side of the alley, tall brick buildings formed a solid barrier. To all appearances, they had not been occupied in months and were falling into ruin. Windows were dark. Many of them were boarded up.

"Well, he's gone," Gail shrugged. "My brilliant ideas usually arrive too late. Hungry?"

"Yes, I am."

"Then let's eat supper and start for Cordell Beach. I neglected to tell Mrs. Andon where we were going. She may worry."

Returning to the parked car, the girls sought a

restaurant in downtown Oronto, and a half hour later were on their way to Cordell Beach. Although disappointed by their failure to gain concrete information, they agreed that the trip had not been a failure.

"Gail," Sara said abruptly as the car approached the home city, "remember those snapshots you took at the Trading Post?"

"The ones I snapped at the old mill?" Gail inquired absently, dimming headlights for an oncoming car.

"Yes, have you ever had them printed?"

"Not yet. I've intended to do it, but keep forgetting."

Sara's question reminded Gail that several other rolls of exposed film had been stored in the glove compartment of the car, likewise awaiting a trip to the photographer. Deciding to leave the films at a drugstore on the way home, she requested her friend to gather the boxes together.

Sara tugged at the dashboard compartment, pulling it open with difficulty. As the little door finally yielded, something smooth and shiny rolled into her lap.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "What have I done now?"

In Sara's lap lay a long, curling strip of exposed film.

"Oh, I've ruined it, Gail!"

"How could you?" Gail asked in a puzzled voice. "The films were all carefully boxed."

"When I opened the compartment door, it just tumbled out."

Gail brought the car to a standstill at the edge of the pavement. One glance at the film disclosed that it had been torn from its paper wrapping. Nor was that the extent of the damage. Thrusting her hand into the glove compartment, she brought it out clutching yard upon yard of worthless film.

"Four rolls," she groaned. "All ruined."

"But I couldn't have done that," Sara protested.

"Of course not," Gail assured her. "This isn't your fault. It was the deliberate work of some hateful person!"

"You think it was done maliciously?"

"How else? Four rolls of sealed film can't crawl out of boxes by themselves."

"It's just too mean!"

"I've carried my camera and films in the car for a year. This is the first time anything ever was touched."

"Is your camera missing?"

Gail groped in the back part of the compartment and to her intense relief found the article. "Thank goodness, for small favors."

"Do you keep your car locked?" Sara asked anxiously.

"Not half the time. I've been careless, no denying that."

Gail could not guess when her car had been entered. During the past two days she had parked it several times on the streets of Cordell Beach without locking the doors. She never bothered to padlock Mrs. Andon's garage at night.

"I only wish I knew who did this smart trick!"

Angrily, Gail gathered up the loose film, hurling it out of the car window. Caught by the wind, it blew far down the pavement.

"What a pity," Sara murmured. "Don't you think any of the pictures would have been good?"

"Not a chance. They were all exposed to light—on purpose, too!"

"I particularly wanted to see the picture you took of the old mill," Sara sighed.

"You shall." Gail spoke grimly.

Sara turned toward her friend in surprise. "How can I when it has been ruined?"

"Fortunately, the roll of film I used on our trip to the Everglades wasn't in this lot. I have it in my room at Mrs. Andon's. I'll get it printed right away."

As the girls drove on toward their rooming house, Gail explained that the destroyed films were not of great consequence. She had taken them on a recent field trip with Mr. Allan.

"All the same, it makes me furious to lose them," declared crossly.

"I don't blame you, Gail. It was such an inusable thing for a person to do."

"What puzzles me is *why* was it done."

"You had taken no pictures which would offend one?"

'Not to my knowledge. Most of the snaps were ure pictures which I had hoped might be good ough for Mr. Allan to use as book illustrations."

'Do you have any enemies, Gail?"

'Oh, there may be persons who don't like me, but sure I have no real enemies unless I've made m in the past few days."

'Mrs. Deva, for example."

'She detests me, certainly," Gail gave a brief gh. "But the pictures would be of no value to , and she couldn't have known I had them in the ."

'Gail—" Sara spoke with a quiet intensity. The had turned into their own street.

'Yes?"

'This may sound silly, but it just occurred to me neone might have been after that picture you k at the old mill."

'And opened the other films because there would no way to tell the right one?"

'That's what I was thinking, Gail."

'The theory doesn't sound silly to me. In fact,

the same thought was percolating in my own mind."

"Of course, I fail to see what value the picture would have," Sara went on reflectively. "Another objection, who could have known you photographed the old mill?"

"Perhaps that mysterious person we followed there. While we never saw him, he may have been watching us all the time."

"I had a feeling as if someone were around, Gail."

"So did I, but that was pure imagination. You can't feel a person looking at you!"

"How soon can you get the film developed, Gail?"

"A place down the street a block offers overnight service if you pay extra. I'll take the film there just as soon as I put the car away."

"That's a good idea."

The Andon residence loomed up on the right hand side of the street, and Gail cut the wheel sharply to make the driveway. As the automobile shaved a pecan tree and rolled into the garage, the door of the rear screened porch opened.

"Is that you, Gail?" called Mrs. Andon in a shrill voice.

"Yes, it is," the girl responded. "I hope you weren't worried because we were so late getting home."

"I've been trying to reach you all afternoon," the woman returned in a worried voice. "When you hear what has happened—"

Without taking time to close the garage doors, the two girls hurried toward the house.

"News of my father?" Sara asked, holding Gail's hand in a tight grip.

"No, the police were here twice, but it's not that."

"What has happened?" Gail asked anxiously.

"Your rooms," Mrs. Andon replied. "Just go upstairs and look at them. They've been ransacked!"

CHAPTER XVI

A VALUABLE PICTURE

SARA AND Gail bounded up the stairway two steps at a time. Reaching the latter's room they flung open the door and switched on the light.

Clothing was scattered over the floor, bureau drawers had been emptied, everything was in disarray. A hasty glance next door disclosed that Sara's room had been treated in similar manner.

Mrs. Andon followed the girls, puffing from having climbed the stairs so fast.

'I haven't touched a thing," she reported. "Your rooms were this way when I came home from the meeting of the Ladies' Improvement Club early this afternoon."

"I suppose the entire house has been stripped of valuables?" Gail asked.

"No, that's the peculiar part of it. Not a thing was touched downstairs or in any of the other rooms. The silverware, my jewelry, even money was left."

"Then whoever broke in was after something which belonged to Sara or me?"

"I am afraid so," Mrs. Andon agreed. "I wish you would check up and see what is missing."

Jerking open a bureau drawer, Gail examined the scattered contents of a jewelry case. Beads, a silver bracelet, pearl earrings, had been removed from their nest of silk, but seemingly had not been sufficiently valuable to steal.

"I think I know what the person may have been after," she muttered. "My Laughing Mask pin!"

"Your *what?*" demanded Mrs. Andon.

"Just a silver pin I found," Gail said hastily, and to forestall questions, asked: "How did the thief enter the house?"

"With the key, I guess," Mrs. Andon acknowledged reluctantly. "I always hide it over the door ledge when I go away. My husband has warned me something like this would happen, but I thought it was safe enough."

"This house may have been watched for the past day or two. Someone probably saw you hide the key, Mrs. Andon."

"But why would the house be watched?"

Gail did not answer, for Sara entered the bedroom.

"Nothing missing in my room," she reported. "But then, I brought nothing of value with me. How about your things, Gail?"

"I haven't made a careful inspection yet. Anyway, I believe the thief was after my silver pin. He slipped up because I had it with me."

"How about the Everglades film?" Sara questioned abruptly.

Gail groaned. "I never once thought of that! It's likely ruined as the others were!"

Darting into the wardrobe closet, she pulled a coat from its hanger, and explored the pockets. She had put the film box there upon her return from the Trading Post as a reminder to take it to the drugstore.

"Gone?" Sara demanded.

"No, it's here!" Gail chuckled, holding up the yellow box.

Mrs. Andon was at a loss to understand the conversation, and her bewilderment increased when the girls revealed how someone had ruined four strips of film in Gail's car.

"I never heard of such a thing!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Why would any person destroy your pictures?"

"That's what I wish I knew," Gail replied soberly, staring at the box in her hand. "I am sure of one thing! I'm going to get this film developed before anything happens to it."

With Sara's assistance, she checked over her various possessions. So far as she could tell nothing was missing. More than ever Gail became convinced that the thief either had been searching for the camera film or the Laughing Mask pin.

While they finished straightening the rooms, the girls discussed the possible identity of the intruder. They were agreed that Mrs. Deva was not the guilty person.

"She knew that I had the pin with me," Gail remarked. "Besides, she left Cordell Beach early in the afternoon."

"No, it couldn't have been Mrs. Deva," Sara said thoughtfully. "How about Madam Alexandre's butler? He's a suspicious looking fellow."

"I was thinking of him," Gail nodded. "Still, I don't see how he could have been the one to ransack our rooms. His duties at Bonniewood must keep him confined there during the day."

"All the same, he doesn't act like a trained servant."

"That's true."

Gail shared Sara's opinion that the butler would bear investigation. Although she did not speak of the matter, she made up her mind that the following day she would try to learn the man's name and a few facts about his past.

"I've been mulling matters over, Sara," she said slowly. "It seems to me that your father may have been robbed, not by one person, but many."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"It's my theory that Mrs. Deva may be a member of a secret organization—a very large one," Gail continued. "Sara, that anonymous letter your fa-

ther received was signed by a picture of a laughing mask!"

"Yes."

"And later a pin bearing the same design and number was picked up near the old mill!"

"True, but I fail to see—"

"Sara, that badge must identify the members of an organization who prey upon society. Possibly they call themselves the Laughing Masks!"

"Oh, Gail, it's too fantastic!"

"The pin was fastened to a torn piece of cloth which might have come from a shirt," Gail went on, paying no heed to Sara's protest. "Now this is my theory. Possibly a captive was being taken at night to the old mill—"

"My father?"

"It could have been. Let's say there was a struggle at the entrance of the trail. If you'll recall, a few bushes had been broken, and the ground was trampled."

"Yes, I remember."

"Assume that in the struggle, the captive tore the pin from the other man's shirt. Since it was dark, it couldn't be recovered. The following day, upon instructions of a superior, Mrs. Deva came to search for it, and reported her loss to Les Haskins."

"Gail, it doesn't sound probable. If your assumption were correct, wouldn't Mrs. Deva be afraid to venture back there?"

"You've hit upon the weak spot in my theory," Gail admitted. "However, the old mill is a considerable distance from the Post, and Les Haskins wouldn't be suspicious."

Sara arose from the bed, smoothing the coverlet.

"There's only one way to test your theory. Even though I can't agree with you, I'm in favor of thoroughly investigating that old mill."

"Early in the morning I'll ask Mr. Allan what can be done about it."

"There's only one reason why Father might be held a captive," Sara said slowly.

"And that?"

"Because he had refused to give up the jade pendant."

"Couldn't it be taken from him by force?"

Sara moved to the doorway to make certain that Mrs. Andon or any of the roomers were not in the hall.

"Father was afraid an attempt might be made to steal the jewel from him. He carried it in a secret hiding place."

"Upon his person?"

"I have never told anyone, Gail."

"Then don't tell me now," Gail said quickly. "I didn't mean to be prying."

"Oh, you aren't. It's just that only Father and I know the secret. I promised never to disclose it."

"Honestly, I don't want to know," Gail reaffirmed, and glancing at the clock added: "It's late! Unless we hurry, the drugstore will be closed."

Telling Mrs. Andon that they would not be gone long, the girls walked to the next corner. Gail was well acquainted with Mr. Gershim, who owned the drugstore there. He did his own photographic work in a back room and often gave her quicker service than his other customers.

"Another rush order," she announced, dropping the film on the counter. "May I have the pictures by tomorrow morning?"

"I intended to close up in about thirty minutes. Tomorrow afternoon won't do?"

"These pictures are really important, Mr. Gershim."

"That's what you always say," the druggist smiled. "But I'll accommodate you this time. Tomorrow at eight."

Gail glanced carefully about as the girls left the drugstore. A man was mailing a letter at the corner box, but even her vivid imagination could not paint him as a suspicious looking character.

"Just making certain we weren't followed," she laughed. "I should have warned Mr. Gershim to guard that film with his life!"

Neither of the girls could understand why pictures taken in the Everglades could have special

value to another person. Yet they shared a belief that the snapshot of the old mill might in some way prove revealing.

Next morning when Gail's alarm clock jingled at seven o'clock, Sara also tumbled out of bed and dressed.

"You didn't need to get up just because I did," Gail protested. "You could have slept another hour at least."

"Oh, I was restless," Sara replied. "Besides, I'm curious to see those pictures."

Breakfasting down the street, the girls were waiting for Mr. Gershim when he opened up the drugstore at eight o'clock.

"How did my pictures turn out?" Gail asked eagerly.

"Six good ones," he returned, handing her a packet.

The girls went outside to open the envelope. With Sara peering over her shoulder, Gail rapidly thumbed through the pictures. All were clear prints but even the scene of the old mill did not seem in the least unusual.

"I can't see why anyone would be interested in any of these," Gail said, deeply disappointed.

Sara selected the picture of the mill from the stack. "At least this proves I was right about the pigeon."

"Pigeon?" Gail inquired. "What pigeon?"

"Don't you remember our argument?" Sara indicated a bird visible on the ledge of an upper window of the mill. "I said I saw one fly into the building, while you said it couldn't be—"

Gail snatched the picture from her friend's hand. "You're right! It is a pigeon on the ledge!"

"Of course! Now will you admit you were wrong?"

Gail did not hear Sara's words. "We must have been blind when we were there!" she exclaimed. "Sara, look closely at this picture. Isn't the window up about a foot?"

"Yes, it is, Gail!"

"And what do you see just behind the pigeon?"

"Behind it?" Sara demanded. "Why, it's just a black shadow."

"Notice the shape," Gail commanded in a tense voice. "Doesn't it take a definite form?"

"I can't see that it does," Sara began, and then ended abruptly: "Oh, yes I can, too! It looks like a hand!"

"And that's exactly what it must be," cried Gail excitedly. "At the moment I snapped the picture someone inside the mill must have opened the window to let that pigeon inside. Remember we thought we heard a door slam? Probably it was the window instead."

"Then you think—"

"That we've been dubs not to insist upon a thorough investigation of that old mill."

"Oh, if only you're right!"

Gail tapped the picture triumphantly. "Sara, this bird must be a carrier pigeon! Why, it's clear as day to me now. Someone inside the mill saw us take the snapshot and knew what it might reveal. Hence we were followed, and my films were ruined!"

"Everything does begin to fit into place."

"Like a glove! That old sailor at Oronto wasn't making fun of us after all."

"You believe he really saw a carrier pigeon flying out to the *Pelican*?"

"I do, Sara, and if it wasn't this same bird, then it must have been its first cousin!"

"Gail—" Sara's eyes were very wide.—"what does all this mean in regard to Father? I—I'm afraid to hope."

Gail shoved the pictures into their envelope, and seizing her friend's hand, started down the street.

"This is the time to act, not hope!" she exclaimed. "We must find Mr. Allan and start for the Post without delay!"

CHAPTER XVII

THE TORN LETTER

A CLOCK on the public square chimed nine o'clock as Gail and Sara let themselves into Mr. Allan's office. The naturalist had not yet arrived. Waiting fifteen minutes they telephoned the Surf Club only to be told that he could not be located.

Restlessly, Sara flipped the pages of a magazine, while Gail made regular trips to the window, staring down at the pedestrians on the street below.

"I can't imagine what is keeping Mr. Allan," she murmured. "He's seldom this late. I am afraid he isn't coming here this morning."

"Oh, Gail, we must do something," Sara declared anxiously. "Can't we drive to the Post alone?"

"I promised Mr. Allan we wouldn't."

"But this is so very important. Already we may have delayed too long."

"I know—"

Gail broke off as she heard a familiar step in the hall. The door swung open and Mr. Allan came into the office.

"Oh, I am so glad you are here at last!" she ex-

claimed and before he could remove his overcoat, began to pour out her story.

The girls half anticipated that Mr. Allan might make light of their theories and fears. Instead he listened soberly, and examined the picture of the old mill under a strong light. He agreed with Gail that the bird shown on the window ledge was a carrier pigeon, but voiced doubt that the dark shadow represented a human hand.

"The pigeon vanished immediately after Gail took the picture," argued Sara. "It must have been drawn inside the mill!"

"I'll get Detective Arley and we'll start for the Post at once," Mr. Allan said with sudden decision. "Gail, telephone Jennings at the Club. Tell him to bring the car without delay."

A few minutes later the chauffeur brought the automobile to the office building. Meanwhile, Mr. Allan had communicated with Edgar Arley, the detective, who agreed to meet the party at the corner of Flagler and Brant streets. He was waiting as the car drew up at the curb.

While they sped along the lonely road leading to the Trading Post, Mr. Allan outlined the situation.

"I'm not sure what we'll run into out there," he said, "but from the evidence Gail and Sara have gathered, it appears the old mill may have been used as a hide-out."

"I have my arsenal with me," the detective

grinned, throwing back his coat to reveal a shoulder holster.

With Jennings at the wheel, the heavy car traveled smoothly over the road. As the sun rose higher, conversation subsided. Only the steady hum of the powerful motor disturbed the stillness of the swamp.

Once Mr. Allan turned his head to follow the flight of a hawk-like bird which dipped into the shallow water bordering the road.

"What is that?" asked Sara.

"A kite," he identified, reaching for binoculars which he kept always in the car pocket. "Not many years ago a fairly common bird in Florida. Now one of the rarest in the United States."

Presently it occurred to Gail to ask the naturalist if he had been successful in gathering information about Mrs. Deva.

"The police have no record of such a person," he replied. "However, a woman by the name of Clara Winstone, whose description slightly resembles that of Mrs. Deva, served two years in the penitentiary. She was implicated in a gigantic jewel swindle."

"Then she may be the same person?"

"There's a possibility of it. No photograph of Clara Winstone was available, but the police expect to have a complete report for me by noon today."

"And are they checking on Madam Alexandre too?" asked Sara pointedly.

"Well, no, I hesitated to request an investigation in her case."

"Is she a privileged character?" Gail interposed dryly.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Madam Alexandre has resided at Cordell Beach off and on for many years. While she may be eccentric, she has contributed heavily to the local art museum and various charities."

"If one should make a mistake in her case it might prove highly embarrassing?" Gail suggested.

"Exactly," Mr. Allan nodded. "Nevertheless, if I were convinced she had anything to do with Doctor Breckenridge's disappearance, I should not hesitate to demand her arrest, no matter what the outcome."

"Mrs. Deva and Madam Alexandre have been closely associated," Gail reminded her employer.

"Only the past few weeks so far as we know. Gail, we must trust to the police and not be too impetuous."

Feeling that she had been mildly rebuked, Gail lapsed into thoughtful silence.

The car passed the Indian village, coming at last to the Trading Post. Leaving Jennings to guard the car, the party walked the remaining distance to the building. The place seemed strangely deserted, for there were no Indians loitering on the porch, and the door opening from it was closed.

"Where is everyone?" Gail murmured.

Mr. Allan tried the door, finding it locked.

"This is a surprise," he admitted. "Les Haskins must have gone away, but he seldom leaves the Post."

After glancing about the clearing, the party started through the woods in the direction of the old mill. They had not walked far when Mr. Allan who led the others, abruptly halted.

"Listen!" he commanded.

From the direction of the river, a crackling sound plainly could be heard. At the same moment Gail saw black smoke rising over the trees.

"A fire!" she cried. "Oh, I hope it isn't the mill!"

Already Mr. Allan had started down the trail at a run. Gail, Sara and Detective Arley followed close behind.

Emerging at the river, they all stopped short, dismayed by the sight which met their gaze. Gail's fears had been confirmed. The old mill was in flames!

Already it was too late to save the building. The lower portion presented a solid wall of flame and dense black smoke poured from the upper windows. A number of Indians, directed by Les Haskins, were endeavoring to keep the fire from spreading.

Gail was the first to speak. "There goes our chance to investigate. The building must have been fired deliberately!"

"Why couldn't we have reached here sooner?" Sara asked with a little moan.

In the red glare reflected on the water, her face had an unnatural glow. Her eyes mirrored horror.

"Supposing Father—" she began, and could not finish.

"Don't even think such thoughts," Gail reproved sternly. "The building must have been deserted."

"You just said you believed it had been fired deliberately."

"Well, possibly," Gail admitted, "to cover up evidence and prevent an investigation. But I certainly don't think anyone was trapped inside. You're upset, Sara."

Taking her friend's arm she led her to a nearby log where they sat down. Mr. Allan and Detective Arley crossed the river, intending to learn from Les Haskins what had caused the fire.

"My nerves are shattered," Sara murmured, burying her face in her hands. "Somehow I had pinned my hopes upon finding evidence here."

"It's a bitter disappointment to me, too," Gail responded gloomily.

Within a few minutes the walls of the old mill fell, sending a shower of sparks into the river. The boathouse at the water's edge did not ignite. Tiny brush fires quickly were extinguished by the alert Indians.

"Shall we cross the river?" Gail suggested when the heat was less intense.

"We may as well," Sara agreed listlessly.

Joining Mr. Allan and Detective Arley who were talking with Les Haskins, they listened to the trader's report of the fire.

"First I knew about it, an Indian came runnin' to the Post, saying the mill was on fire. When I got here—that wasn't more than fifteen minutes ago—the building was an inferno."

"Do you figure it was set, Les?" Mr. Allan questioned.

"Sure do," was the laconical response. "Fact is, I saw the men who did it."

"You saw them!" Sara cried.

"I'm fairly certain of it. Just as I got here a motor boat with two men in it raced away from shore. They had something in the bottom, covered up with canvas."

"You didn't see what it was?" Gail asked.

"No, and I didn't get a look at the men either. They kept their backs turned. When I shouted for 'em to stop, they put on speed. They disappeared downstream, making for the sea."

"We might try to pursue them," Mr. Allan said, thinking aloud.

"You couldn't overtake 'em Henry. They had a fast boat."

"What do you figure all this means, Les?"

The trader's gaze wandered from Mr. Allan to Sara and Gail who eagerly awaited his reply.

"Well," he said, "I calculate maybe these girls had the right slant when they thought the place was being used for a hide-out."

"Have you learned anything since we were here?" asked Gail.

Before replying, the trader stamped out a burning ember which dropped at his feet. His tone when he spoke made it clear that he regretted not having taken the girls' report more seriously.

"After you left I dropped around here and looked the mill over," he said. "I didn't have any tools with me so I couldn't pry off any window boards. I intended to come back again. One thing and another kept me from it."

Gail and Sara found it slight consolation that they had been right and the trader wrong. After watching the fire for a few minutes, they decided to walk down to the boathouse.

Leaving the three men to talk, they circled the burning mill. The heat was intense, and they could feel it searing their faces.

"We certainly were stupid, or rather, I was," Sara commented dispiritedly. "Here, we had it in our power to learn what was going on, but we waited too long."

"The chance of capturing those men now isn't

very good," Gail acknowledged. "Then, too, if we should trace them, we have no evidence to support a charge."

"It makes me fairly ill."

Glancing at Sara, Gail saw that the girl really looked as if she had gone through a long illness. For days she had forced herself to remain hopeful, but now her courage fast was deserting her.

"Gail," she said in a voice barely audible. "Father will never be found alive. I've been deluding myself."

Gail slipped an arm about her waist. "You mustn't take such an attitude, Sara. Remember, the police are active."

"The police! What have they done to help me?"

"We're by no means at the end of our own investigation. I am confident Mr. Allan will demand Mrs. Deva's arrest."

"That's our only hope now. But when the police try to find her, no doubt she'll be gone."

In the soft mud near the boathouse, the girls observed footprints. Whether or not they had been made by the men who had departed by motor boat, they were unable to tell. Satisfied there was nothing more to be learned, they turned away.

A breeze blowing from the burning building, brought a cloud of thick black smoke directly into their faces. Coughing and choking, they sought to escape it.

As Gail ran with head lowered, she saw a scrap of torn linen paper lying near the water's edge. Stooping, she picked it up.

A single word embossed at the top of the page stood out in bold relief. The word was Bonniewood.

Before Gail could read more, another cloud of smoke enveloped her. Thrusting the paper into her pocket, she ran after Sara.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE BEACH HOTEL

NOT UNTIL she was some distance from the burning building did Gail pause to examine the paper she had found lying in the mud. To all appearances it had been part of a letter written on Bonniewood stationery.

"This must have been discarded by those men who fired the mill and fled in the motor boat!" she thought, her pulse stepping up a pace. "Maybe I've found something!"

The message itself, smeared by mud and water, began "association with Madam Alexandre," but the words following were not readily distinguishable.

Skipping them for the time being, Gail glanced at the bottom of the sheet. It was signed "J. E.," and beside it appeared the number (12).

"Twelve!" she murmured aloud. "Why, those are the same figures which appear on the reverse side of my Laughing Mask pin!"

Startled by her discovery, she started to summon Sara who was a few paces ahead. Then suddenly she changed her mind. It seemed cruel to build up

hope which easily might be shattered. Far better, she decided, to keep this latest knowledge from Sara. But she would show the paper to Mr. Allan and Detective Arley.

Sara had paused at the edge of the river. "Coming?" she called.

Gail thrust the torn letter into her pocket again and joined her friend. Yet her face must have betrayed excitement, for Sara gave her a puzzled glance.

"Is anything wrong, Gail?"

"Wrong? Why, no, what makes you think that?"

"You look so funny, and I thought I saw you pick up something from the ground when we were at the boathouse."

"I swallowed as much smoke as a professional fire-eater," Gail laughed evasively.

Before Sara could ask another question they were met by Mr. Allan, Detective Arley, and Les Haskins.

"We've talked this over," the naturalist said. "Arley and I both think it will be wise to ask the Coast Guards to keep watch of the *Pelican*."

"Then you believe there's a connection between what happened here and the mysterious comings and goings of the carrier pigeon!" Gail cried eagerly.

"The clue is worth investigating, at least. We'll start for Cordell Beach at once, since there's nothing more to be learned here."

Saying good-bye to Les Haskins, the party returned to the automobile. During the long ride Gail had no opportunity to speak with the naturalist alone. Upon arriving in Cordell Beach, Mr. Allan instructed Jennings to drop him off at the police station and then take the girls on to Mrs. Andon's home.

"Oh, Mr. Allan," Gail began as he and Detective Arley both left the car, "there's something I want to show you—"

"I'll try to see you later this afternoon at the office," he responded, turning away. "Right now I have important matters on my mind."

Before Gail could assure him that her matter was equally important, he was gone.

Jennings drove the girls to their rooming house. They ate a belated lunch, and then Gail suggested to Sara that she try to conserve her strength by lying down for an hour.

"While you're sleeping I'll attend to a little errand," she said carelessly.

"No, let me go with you," Sara replied. "If I keep busy I haven't time to think, and it's much easier."

"You should try to sleep."

"I can't. Please take me with you."

"Well, I had intended to drive to Madam Alexandre's estate," Gail admitted reluctantly.

Sara gave her a quick glance. "Will it do any good to talk with her again?"

"This time I have a feeling it may."

"Gail, you're hiding something from me!" Sara suddenly accused.

"What gave you that idea?" Gail laughed with attempted lightness.

"You've acted differently ever since we were at the Post."

"Have I? Perhaps it's just that I feel matters may be drawing to a head. Well, come along if you like."

At Bonniewood a disappointment awaited the girls. As they slowed down intending to turn into the estate, a limousine rolled through the gateway, leaving the grounds. The car was driven by the butler who had changed into a chauffeur's uniform. Madam Alexandre sat alone in the rear seat.

"Too late," Sara commented as she watched the limousine start in the same direction they had traveled.

"Wonder where Madam Alexandre is going? Suppose we tag along and see? I really have an important matter to discuss with her."

"All right," Sara agreed. "I don't think Madam Alexandre or her chauffeur saw our car."

The limousine had disappeared beyond a bend in the road. Gail stepped on the accelerator and, drawing closer again, kept just far enough behind

so that the occupants would not realize they were being followed.

Soon it became evident to the girls that if they continued to trail Madam Alexandre, a long journey might lie ahead of them. Anxiously, Gail glanced at the gasoline gauge.

"Only an inch!" she exclaimed. "That won't take us far."

"Oughtn't we to turn back, Gail? I don't see what we can learn by following."

"Do you realize Madam Alexandre has taken a road which leads to Oronto?"

"No! Then perhaps it will be worth while to keep on."

"That depends upon you. I forgot to bring my purse as usual. Any money?"

Sara could gather together only seventy-five cents in nickels and dimes.

"This will buy a few gallons of gas," she said, pouring the money into her friend's palm.

Gail waited until they came to a long stretch of straight road before turning into a filling station.

"Three gallons, no oil, and don't polish anything!" she told the attendant crisply.

Underway once more, the girls soon caught a glimpse of the limousine again, and kept a steady distance behind it.

"I do believe Oronto is our destination!" Sara commented as the resort city could be seen ahead.

"Would you guess Madam Alexandre is going there to board the *Pelican*?"

"If she does, it will shatter my latest theory," replied Gail, frowning.

"Your latest?"

"Oh, I have a different one every few minutes," Gail said hastily. "Unfortunately, this trip of Madam Alexandre's doesn't fit in with any of them."

The limousine had entered the outskirts of Oronto. Fearing that she might lose sight of it in downtown traffic, Gail drew much closer.

Without halting in the business section, the limousine followed the wide boulevard which curved around the waterfront. Somewhat to Gail's surprise, it presently turned into the private grounds of a large beach hotel.

"Now I don't know what to think!" she exclaimed, parking on the street. "I didn't expect this."

As the girls watched, Madam Alexandre left the car and entered the hotel. The chauffeur then drove to an adjoining parking yard hidden behind a wing of the building.

"Now what's our next move?" asked Sara with a shrug. "I should say we've had a long trip for nothing."

"Perhaps, not." Gail slid from behind the steering wheel. "Since we're here, let's learn why Madam Alexandre came."

Leaving the car, the girls made their way across a rolling green lawn to the hotel entrance. An attendant in shiny brass buttons ceremoniously opened the door. Ignoring it for the moment, Gail paused to glance toward the bay.

"Sara, you can see the *Pelican* from here," she observed.

"So you can. I'm glad to know it hasn't left port."

Entering the hotel lobby, the girls glanced about. Madam Alexandre was nowhere to be seen. They wandered through the halls, finally coming to a French door which opened upon a canopied terrace.

"There she is!" Gail exclaimed.

"There they both are," corrected Sara.

At one of the tables, waiting to be served, sat Madam Alexandre and Mrs. Deva. They were engaged in conversation but the words could not be heard so far away. However, Madam Alexandre seemed to be arguing with the younger woman, trying to convince her of something against her will. Mrs. Deva kept shrugging and shaking her head.

"Could we take a table close by?" Sara suggested.

"They would be certain to recognize us."

"I guess it wouldn't do," Sara admitted. "But how are we to learn anything?"

Gail did not reply immediately. She was truly worried and at a loss to know how to act in the present puzzling situation.

"I should have talked with Mr. Allan about a certain matter before we left Cordell Beach," she said anxiously. "I'm going to telephone him now by long distance. He'll advise me."

"What do you plan to use for money?" Sara asked dryly.

"Never thought of that! I'll reverse the charges."

Requesting Sara to keep watch of the terrace, Gail closed herself into a telephone booth. She called the Surf Club, Mr. Allan's office, and as a last resort, the Cordell Beach police station. Unable to contact the naturalist, she asked in desperation for Detective Arley and finally was connected with him.

Tersely Gail identified herself, told where she was, and why she had followed Madam Alexandre. Mentioning the letter she had found near the old mill, she read the contents aloud.

"That's an important clue," the detective advised. "Keep watch of Madam Alexandre and Mrs. Deva until I can get there. And don't lose that letter!"

Gail had just finished the conversation when Sara came hurriedly down the hall to tap on the window of the booth. She quickly joined her friend.

"Mrs. Deva and Madam Alexandre aren't leaving?"

"They're still on the terrace," Sara replied. "It's the chauffeur. I just saw him leave the parking lot."

"In the car?"

"No, afoot. I wouldn't have thought much about

it, only he glanced carefully toward the hotel as if afraid Madam Alexandre might see him. Then he slipped around behind a group of buildings, trying to keep out of sight."

"Which way did he go?"

"Down the beach."

Gail was thinking fast. "Sara, Detective Arley is on his way here," she said. "You stay and keep Mrs. Deva and Madam Alexandre in sight. I'll check on the chauffeur."

"Don't be gone too long," Sara warned uneasily. "I can't drive a car, you know. If Madam Alexandre should leave, I'd be unable to follow."

"She'll not be likely to go without her chauffeur. But I'll probably be back in a few minutes."

Avoiding the terrace, Gail left the hotel by a side door. She walked rapidly in the direction Sara had indicated. Far ahead she saw a man striding along the beach, and as she drew a little closer, decided that he must be Madam Alexandre's chauffeur.

Unaware that he was being followed, the man kept to the beach until it petered out. He then chose a board sidewalk which finally brought him to the wharves. Several times he glanced at his watch, as if fearing that his errand might be consuming too much time.

"He's up to something," thought Gail. "Shouldn't wonder if he intends to board the *Pelican*."

Her supposition proved incorrect. Although the

chauffeur glanced at the anchored yacht with an intent gaze, he turned from the wharves toward a cluster of dirty warehouses. Gail saw him enter the same alley which she and Sara had explored the previous night.

"So that's where he's going," she whispered. "If I make no false moves, I may learn more than I did last time!"

As she watched from the street, the man paused before the door of an apparently abandoned building. He fitted a key into the lock and, vanishing inside, closed the door after him.

Gail waited a minute before slipping down the alley to test the door. It was locked.

Her alert gaze roved swiftly along the high brick wall of the building. There were several windows but all were boarded or closed with metal shutters too high above her head to be reached.

"I must get in there somehow," she muttered. "But how?"

As she was considering the situation, a truck loaded with rubbish and ashes pulled up not a dozen yards away, stopping directly beneath a fire escape. The driver climbed from the cab and disappeared into the basement of a building across the alley.

Gail did not stop to think twice. Running to the truck she scrambled from the fenders to the top of the cab, and thence onto the fire escape. Three flights up the iron stairway brought her to the roof-

top. There was no door leading into the building as she had hoped. However, her gaze fell upon a partly open skylight.

Pushing against the glass, she peered down into the dark interior. Dimly she could make out the floor, easily twelve feet below her.

Gail hesitated, started to close the skylight, then changed her mind. Lowering her feet through the opening, she groped about until her hand encountered the chain which controlled the window.

"Here's hoping for a happy landing," she thought grimly.

Gripping the chain with both hands, she slid from the ledge and swung free.

CHAPTER XIX

BENEATH THE GALLERY

THE SKYLIGHT above Gail's head slammed shut with a loud bang. The chain cut into her hands, but she clung and slid until she reached the end of it.

Releasing her hold she dropped five feet to the floor below. The resulting jolt made a startling sound in the empty room.

Gail listened a moment and then limped to the door. She had twisted her ankle slightly in the drop, yet scarcely was aware of any pain.

Cautiously, she opened the door. She could hear men's voices, far away and indistinct. The sounds seemed to come from the lower part of the building.

Tiptoeing down a dark hallway she reached a rickety wooden stairway which led to a second floor gallery overlooking a large main room at street level. There the stairway ended.

The low murmur of voices had become louder. Gail thought she recognized the gruff tones of Madam Alexandre's chauffeur. Moving noiselessly to the balcony railing, she peered down.

At first she could see no one. Then beyond the

main room in a narrow corridor opening upon the alley, she distinguished the shadowy outline of two men. Madam Alexandre's chauffeur was speaking:

"We sail tonight at eleven. Cordwitz says the engine's in shape again."

"Time we're pullin' out of here."

"We nearly messed the deal," the chauffeur agreed. "But everything's set now."

"What about *him*?" The other man whose face Gail could not see, jerked a thumb in the direction of the main room. "We're not takin' the old geezer with us?"

"Cordwitz wouldn't be that stupid. You're to stay here on guard until you get your final orders. Now I gotta get back to the hotel."

A door slammed.

Gail was puzzled by the reference to a prisoner for she could see no one save the guard. As he turned and came from the corridor, she hastily moved away from the railing.

The guard paused beneath the gallery.

"Anything you want, Doc?" he asked gruffly.

The reply barely was audible. "Water, please."

"Listen, you've drank a whole bottle since morning," the guard complained. "You know there ain't none in the building."

"Water," the prisoner pleaded. "Please—I am burning up."

"You must have picked up a fever out there in

the swamp," the guard answered. "I'll go across the street and fetch your water, but this is the last you'll get!"

Gail heard the heavy step of the guard as he walked across the room. The corridor door opened and closed, and a key grated in the lock.

The instant the man had disappeared, she ran to the railing again. She could not lean far enough to see beneath it but by this time she was certain that the prisoner must be Doctor Breckenridge.

Softly she called his name.

At first the only response was a low moan. But as she called in a louder voice, a board creaked, and she was answered in a hoarse croak: "Who—who is there?"

"A friend," Gail said encouragingly. "I'll help you escape, if only I can get down to you."

"The net," the man muttered. "The fish net."

Gail did not understand what he meant. For a moment she thought that Doctor Breckenridge must be delirious. And then her roving gaze fell upon a dust-covered fish net which hung at the far end of the gallery.

Seizing upon it, she knotted one end about a gallery post. The meshes, old and rotten, were broken in many places, but she thought as she tested the net that it should hold her slight weight.

Using the strength of muscular arms, she lowered herself hand over hand to the main floor.

Beneath the gallery lay a man of middle age with graying hair. His face was grimy and flushed, lips swollen and cracked. Lusterless eyes blinked at her owlishly under their puffy lids. His hands and feet were loosely bound.

"I'll have you free in a minute," Gail gasped, horrified by such a picture of distress.

It was not that easy for she had no knife with which to sever the ropes. Laboriously, she tried to pick the knots. Her nervous haste made the task more difficult.

"Hurry! hurry!" urged the doctor. "The guard soon will return."

At last Gail had the prisoner's hands free and he was then able to help her with the ankle cords. Released, the doctor struggled to his feet but would have fallen had she not caught his arm. Even with assistance, he barely was able to walk.

The situation remained a desperate one. As a means of escape, the fish net ladder was out of the question because the doctor could not possibly climb it. Gail knew there must be a stairway somewhere in the building. But even should they regain the gallery and the upper floor, it would be impossible to leave by means of the skylight. All windows on the ground floor were high overhead and boarded.

"The guard!" Doctor Breckenridge warned suddenly.

Plainly they could hear approaching footsteps outside the building.

"Behind the door!" Gail whispered. "It's our only chance!"

She caught up a piece of rope with which the doctor had been bound. Moving through the dark corridor, she deliberately dropped it at the entrance-way of the main room where she hoped the guard would see it the instant he opened the door. The chance was a slim one but it offered their only hope.

Scarcely had Gail and Doctor Breckenridge flattened themselves against the wall when they heard the key in the lock. The door was pushed open. It turned back on rusty hinges, offering them momentary protection.

"What's this?" The guard's wrathful exclamation told Gail that he had seen the rope.

Without bothering to close the door, the man ran forward and seized the cord. He glanced at it and ran into the main room where his prisoner had been left.

Gail and Doctor Breckenridge heard his shout of rage, but by that time they were in the alley. They reached the street where the doctor collapsed weakly against a building.

Frantically, Gail glanced about for help. The streets were deserted. Doctor Breckenridge could walk no farther, and in a moment the guard, who doubtlessly was armed, might be upon them.

As she despaired, a taxi turned a nearby corner. Gail waved and shouted.

Hearing her, the cabman made a wide circle in the street and stopped at the curb.

Leaning heavily on Gail's arm, Doctor Breckenridge staggered to the cab. The driver swung open the door, and then sprang out to help.

"Old man had too much to drink?" he asked with a knowing grin.

Gail did not try to explain. Instead, she ordered curtly: "To the Beach Hotel, and don't spare the gas pedal!"

As the cab sped along the waterfront, Doctor Breckenridge leaned his head weakly on the seat-back.

"I don't know who you are—" he mumbled with an effort.

"My name is Gail Landreth, and I am Sara's friend. She's here you know."

"Sara? But I left her in New York."

"She came in search of you. We've all been dreadfully worried, and for good reason. Doctor Breckenridge, what happened?"

"It's a long story," he sighed wearily.

"If you don't feel equal to telling it please don't try," Gail said at once.

"I am tired," he murmured. "Later—"

"Tell me just one thing," Gail urged. "Did they get the jade pendant?"

Doctor Breckenridge nodded. "Yesterday. I had it hidden in the sole of my shoe. Kept the secret for days. Then I weakened—couldn't stand against them. They have the jewel and they're making their escape tonight on a boat called the *Argus*."

"That must be the *Pelican* renamed," Gail said to herself. And to the doctor: "Who was responsible for your imprisonment? Did Mrs. Deva—"

The cab had swung into the Beach Hotel driveway. Opening the door, the driver said rather pointedly: "Seventy-five cents."

"I—I haven't a penny with me!" Gail gasped.

Doctor Breckenridge reached into a pocket and shook his head. "They stripped me of everything valuable."

"Say what is this?" the cabman demanded suspiciously.

"We'll pay you," Gail insisted. "Just wait here while we go into the hotel—"

"Oh, no you don't! I've been fooled that way before. Either fork over or I'll call a cop!"

"Do that!" was Gail's surprising response. "Get one as quickly as you can!"

The cabman stared at her, unable to understand such strange actions. He did not try to stop her as she helped Doctor Breckenridge into the hotel.

"Wait here!" Gail said, leading him to a comfortable lobby seat. "I'll bring Sara."

She hastened to the terrace where she had left

her friend. The tea tables were deserted. Madam Alexandre and Mrs. Deva both had departed and Sara was nowhere visible.

Gail approached a waitress who was changing table cloths.

"Excuse me, I am looking for a girl who was here a few minutes ago. She wore a blue dress and a white hat."

"Haven't seen her," the waitress replied indifferently.

"There were two women sitting at this table—"

"Ask someone else," interrupted the waitress. "I just came on duty."

Without success, Gail questioned several other hotel employees. Not wishing to remain away from Doctor Breckenridge too long, she then decided to return to the lobby.

In the archway leading from the terrace, she stopped short. A throng of persons had gathered about the doctor's chair.

Gail's first thought was that the cabman had returned with a policeman. But as she pushed through the crowd, she steeled herself for a more difficult encounter. Madam Alexandre faced the doctor, hurling accusations in a loud, bitter voice.

"I'll have you arrested!" she cried. "Summon a policeman, someone! This man is a thief!"

"Madam Alexandre," the doctor protested in a low tone. "I can explain everything."

"The only explanation I shall accept is the jade pendant or my money!"

"I regret, Madam, the pendant has been stolen from me—"

"You are a cheap trickster! If I had not met you by accident here at the hotel, you might have eluded the police indefinitely."

Elbowing her way through the crowd, Gail reached Doctor Breckenridge's chair. She faced Madam Alexandre with blazing eyes.

"Leave him alone! Can't you see that he is ill? Doctor Breckenridge is unable to answer questions now, much less face your false accusations!"

"So you have had a hand in this, too?" Madam Alexandre demanded.

"I am taking a hand now! Doctor Breckenridge has been imprisoned by the persons who stole the pendant! Less than fifteen minutes ago I released him from a waterfront warehouse."

Madam Alexandre laughed scornfully. "And you expect me to believe such a ridiculous story? Oh, will someone *please* call a policeman?"

As if in response to her appeal, the hotel manager pushed through the throng, followed by an officer and the irate cabman.

"There they are," he accused, indicating Gail and the doctor. "Tried to cheat me out of my fare!"

"Arrest them both!" Madam Alexandre demanded.

Gail began to laugh a trifle hysterically. The scene had all the elements of a melodramatic movie! But she was not laughing a moment later when the policeman, after listening to Madam Alexandre's exciting story, told the three that they could continue their argument at the police station.

"Officer, you can't take me," Madam Alexandre protested. "I will appear later to make my charge."

"You're all coming along now."

To the delight of the crowd, the policeman escorted Madam Alexandre, Doctor Breckenridge and Gail toward the door. The doctor staggered and nearly fell.

"None o' that," the policeman ordered sharply. "Walk right along."

"Doctor Breckenridge is weak and sick," Gail protested. "He needs immediate medical attention."

"That's what you say."

Anger surged over her as the officer paid no heed to her words. Unable to control her actions, she suddenly jerked free and ran. She had no plan, only a wild desire to elude the policeman and bring help to Doctor Breckenridge.

"Hey, you!" the officer shouted furiously.

Releasing Doctor Breckenridge and Madam Alexandre, he lunged after the girl.

What might have been the outcome of her rash act Gail never knew. For, reaching a side exit, she

ran straight into the arms of Henry Allan and Detective Arley.

"Gail!" the naturalist exclaimed.

"I've found him—Doctor Breckenridge!" she gasped. "But Madam Alexandre has demanded that we both be arrested! Oh, Mr. Allan do something quick!"

CHAPTER XX

EXPLANATIONS

"YOU'LL NOT be arrested, Gail," replied Mr. Allan.

Deliberately, he stepped in front of the excited girl, glaring at the policeman who attempted to seize her arm. Detective Arley also moved forward. Flashing his badge, he spoke in a voice of quiet authority, telling the officer he had made a serious mistake.

Greatly relieved to have two able defenders, Gail turned to gaze back into the lobby. She was not surprised to see Madam Alexandre, who had eluded hotel officials, slipping out the main entrance. However, the policeman also observed her and ran in pursuit.

"Oh, Mr. Allan," Gail said jerkily. "I am so glad you arrived, but there's no time to be lost! The men who robbed and imprisoned Sara's father are planning to escape on the *Argus*. Really the *Pelican*."

"Don't worry about that," the naturalist returned. "Before leaving Cordell Beach, Detective Arley ordered Coast Guards to keep the yacht under surveillance. Where did you find Doctor Breckenridge?"

Tersely Gail related how she had followed Madam Alexandre's chauffeur, and had gained entrance to the waterfront warehouse. She provided the address of the building and gave Detective Arley a description of the hooked-nose man who had guarded Doctor Breckenridge.

"I'll have the warehouse searched," he promised crisply. "It's unlikely we'll capture anyone there now, but I'll spread a city-wide net."

While the detective hurried away to telephone for police re-enforcements, Gail and her employer sought Doctor Breckenridge who was under guard by the hotel management.

Mr. Allan was deeply shocked by the appearance of his old friend. With an authority not to be denied, he ordered the doctor removed to a bedroom, and sent for the hotel physician.

"Henry, I wish I could see Sara," the man muttered feverishly. "I want Sara."

"She'll be here in a few minutes," Mr. Allan soothed him. "Just lie quiet and try to relax."

Asking the doctor only the most essential questions regarding the identity of those who had tortured him, they temporarily left him in the care of a nurse. Drawing Gail into the corridor, Mr. Allan asked where Sara might be found.

"That's what worries me," she admitted. "I left her here when I trailed Madam Alexandre's chauffeur. She's disappeared."

Gail and Mr. Allan returned to the lobby, in-

tending to make an extensive inquiry for the missing girl. However, as they left the elevator, they were overjoyed to see Sara hurrying toward the terrace. Hearing her name called, she turned.

"Sara, where have you been?" Gail demanded, running to her. "I have wonderful news for you!"

"And I for you! I saw the capture! It was thrilling!"

"What capture do you mean?" Gail asked in bewilderment. "Not Madam Alexandre's arrest?"

"No, the taking of the *Pelican*. I saw it all from shore. Coast Guard cutters surrounded the yacht and removed at least a dozen persons and members of the crew! Mrs. Deva, too, I think."

"Then that's absolutely perfect!" Gail chortled. "But how did you happen to be on the waterfront? I left you here."

"After you followed the chauffeur, I kept watch of Madam Alexandre and Mrs. Deva. They came into the corridor where I stood and I heard them arguing. Madam Alexandre kept trying to induce Mrs. Deva to return with her to Cordell Beach."

"She refused?"

"Yes, Mrs. Deva announced that she was through with Madam Alexandre and intended to leave Florida. Finally they separated. Mrs. Deva started down the beach so I left a note for you at the desk and followed."

"I never thought to inquire there."

"Mrs. Deva went directly to the docks," resumed

Sara. "A sailor met her and they rowed out to the yacht. I was asking myself what I should do when up steamed the Coast Guard cutters. You know the rest."

"Sara, apparently you haven't heard the very best part," Gail said quietly. "Your father has been found."

Sara clutched her friend's hand with a pressure which hurt. "Is—is it really true?" she murmured. "Where is he?"

"Upstairs in Room 608 with a nurse we engaged. He's been calling for you."

"A nurse!" Sara gasped. "Then he has been mistreated!"

"Your father contracted a fever while confined in the Everglades," Mr. Allan interposed soothingly. "The doctor says it's not serious. He'll be as well as ever within a few days."

Sara pleaded to be taken to her father at once. Barely taking time to witness the happy reunion, Gail and Mr. Allan again withdrew to confer. From a hotel employee they learned that Madam Alexandre had been recaptured and taken to the police station.

"But that's a mistake!" exclaimed Gail. "I must go there and try to prevent them from placing a charge against her."

"You think Madam Alexandre had no part in the plot?" Mr. Allan asked.

"I am almost certain of it."

Taxiing to the Oronto police station, Gail and her employer learned that not only Madam Alexandre, but fourteen persons from the *Argus* had been taken into custody. The prisoners included Mrs. Deva and Madam Alexandre's butler-chauffeur who sullenly gave his name as James Esselmann.

"His initials would be J. E.," Gail murmured thoughtfully. "The same which were signed to that torn letter I found near the old mill!"

Before she could talk with an official, a disturbance broke out in the room. Upon being arraigned, Madam Alexandre had entered a plea of not guilty, which immediately was challenged by Mrs. Deva.

"You're in this the same as the rest of us," she screamed at her former employer. "It was you who schemed to get Doctor Breckenridge's jewel!"

"You lie to protect yourself," Madam Alexandre returned coldly. "I was duped—taken in by a group of international crooks—I realize it all now."

As accusations flew thick and fast, Gail stepped forward, asking permission to present her own evidence. After telling all she knew about the case, she withdrew a soiled, torn paper from her pocket.

"Madam Alexandre is innocent," she said. "I believe this letter which I found in the Everglades will prove it."

Aloud she read the communication:

" ' association with Madam Alexandre convinced me she never will join the L M's and so I suggest we go ahead with our original plan.

"The letter is signed by J. E. and the number (12)," Gail continued. "The writer must have been James Esselmann. L M stands for the name of an organization, the Laughing Mask. With Mrs. Deva, Esselmann obtained employment at Bonniewood, no doubt intending to induce Madam Alexandre to enter the plot against Doctor Breckenridge. Association with her convinced them any such proposal would only result in exposure, so they abandoned their original plan."

"Lies—all lies," Mrs. Deva proclaimed bitterly.

"No, it is the truth," Madam Alexandre insisted. "I employed the pair when they answered an advertisement I ran in the paper. As I look back I realize they acted suspiciously, cleverly obtaining information from me regarding my business affairs. I have been a very foolish old lady."

At the request of the police judge, Gail revealed everything she knew about the Laughing Mask organization, mentioning her belief that each member of the group had been identified by a number. Facts gleaned from Doctor Breckenridge also were presented to the court.

"Communication between the mill and the *Argus* must have been maintained by carrier pigeon," she disclosed. "It was the plan, I think, to obtain the jewel and make a quick get-away. But Doctor Breckenridge had the pendant well hidden and proved unexpectedly stubborn in divulging his secret. For

days he refused to reveal the hiding place. To complicate matters, the *Argus* had engine trouble.

"Following Les Haskins' investigation at the mill, members of the gang became alarmed. They fired the building, removing Doctor Breckenridge by motor boat to Oronto and thence to the warehouse."

Vehemently, Mrs. Deva contradicted Gail's story, but her words carried no weight. She had been arrested aboard the *Argus* where a valuable cache of jewels, including the jade pendant, had been found. Then, too, a search of police records and morgue pictures, served to identify her as Clara Winstone, international jewel thief wanted by Scotland Yard.

With other prisoners taken from the yacht, the woman was locked in a cell. However, due to Gail's testimony, no charge was placed against Madam Alexandre.

"Thank you, Miss Landreth, for coming to my defense," the woman said gratefully. "I cannot tell you how deeply I regret my past actions. As soon as Doctor Breckenridge will see me, I shall call and apologize."

"Madam Alexandre, please explain one thing," Gail requested. "Yesterday when Mr. Allan and I were at Bonniewood, why did you tell us Mrs. Deva was not there?"

"Mrs. Deva previously had complained that you were annoying her. I considered you a meddler, I am ashamed to say."

"And why did you follow her to Oronto?"

"Mrs. Deva left a letter saying she had decided to give up her position as secretary. Learning that she had gone to the Beach Hotel, I drove there, hoping to persuade her to return. Mrs. Deva was a crook, but the best secretary I ever employed."

"Until today you had no idea she was connected with a disreputable organization?"

"I never dreamed of such a thing! Oh, I've been very foolish, distrusting my friends, and placing confidence in those who sought to use me for their own ends."

A half hour later, as Gail and Mr. Allan were leaving the station, Detective Arley appeared. A search of the warehouse had disclosed no great amount of evidence. However, the hooked-nose guard, and a man named Cordwitz, had been apprehended in another section of the city.

Back at the Beach Hotel once more, Gail and her employer were happy to find Doctor Breckenridge greatly improved. Strengthened by food and rest, he told how the jade pendant had been taken from him.

"Upon my arrival in Cordell Beach I was met by a man who claimed to be Madam Alexandre's chauffeur. He and a companion drove me a distance into the Everglades before I became suspicious. Then they calmly pressed a revolver against my ribs, stripped me of valuables, and demanded the jade pendant.

"Naturally I insisted I did not have it on my person. They searched me without success. After dark I was taken to a hide-out in the Everglades. As we started down the trail toward a river, I tried to escape."

"In the struggle did you tear your captor's shirt?" Gail interrupted.

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"Mr. Allan found a piece of cloth fastened to a Laughing Mask pin lying on the trail. It must have belonged to Esselmann."

"What I can't understand is why members of the organization identified themselves with special badges," Sara commented.

"That's what puzzles me," said Gail.

"The organization is a very large one," her father returned. "I learned that much during my imprisonment. Many of the persons are known to each other only by numbers."

"And how was it learned that you had the jade pendant, Father?"

"From my enemies in China. The organization was commissioned to recover the jewel for a set price."

Nearly all questions had been answered to the satisfaction of the girls, but a few remained to plague them. They believed that Mrs. Deva had attempted to recover the Laughing Mask pin for Esselmann, fearing that its discovery near the mill trail might lead to an investigation.

"It must have been Mrs. Deva, too, who opened my suitcase at the railroad station," Sara declared.

"I may have been responsible for that," informed Doctor Breckenridge. "For several days I had my captors thinking that the jewel was not in my possession. They must have learned of your arrival and thought that you were carrying it."

"My guess would be that Mrs. Deva came upon the anonymous letter while searching for the pendant," nodded Gail. "Fearing it might fall into the hands of police, she confiscated it."

Many days elapsed before the entire story was pieced together. But ultimately, after the conviction of Mrs. Deva, Esselmann, and other members of the Laughing Mask organization, all details of the plot were made known.

One afternoon Gail was somewhat surprised to receive a call from Madam Alexandre, who again apologized for her rude actions of the past.

"I owe you an apology, too," Gail confessed. "At first, I actually thought you were conspiring against Doctor Breckenridge. You see, my suspicions were aroused when you examined a telegram dropped by Mr. Allan at the Surf Club."

"A telegram?" The woman looked puzzled. "I don't remember."

"You pushed it beneath the porch of your cabana."

"Then I must have done so absently, for I recall nothing of the matter."

"It's of no consequence anyway," Gail laughed. "Have you talked with Doctor Breckenridge?"

"Oh, yes, we had a long discussion, and I apologized to Sara also. As for the jewel, the transaction has been completed. Nevertheless, I confess, that after what has happened, I have less desire to own it than I did."

Madam Alexandre chatted for a few minutes and then departed, cordially inviting Gail to visit Bonniewood and bring Sara with her.

In the days following the girls spent many pleasant hours on the Surf Club beach. Doctor Breckenridge, who was rapidly recovering his health, usually accompanied them, thoroughly enjoying a daily sun bath.

Mr. Allan made only a pretense of work. Lying in the shade of a huge umbrella, he occasionally dictated portions of his new book to Gail. However, he easily could be tempted to abandon it for a swim.

"You spoil me shamefully," she assured him one afternoon.

"So you like being my secretary?" Mr. Allan asked with twinkling eyes. "Especially the salary part, eh?"

"Oh, the salary is nice," she answered, "but I truly like the work. Why, I could even learn to love your old swamp, Mr. Allan, if only it would bring me another grand adventure."

THE END

IN AN EFFORT to acquaint the reader with other popular and appealing mystery stories written by Mildred A. Wirt, which we feel ought not to be missed for their gripping plots, fast-moving action, and sheer entertainment value, we take pleasure in presenting in the following pages the complete first chapter of another thrilling mystery tale titled, *The Runaway Caravan*.

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THE RUNAWAY CARAVAN

CHAPTER I

A Forbidden Treat

"Do WALK faster, Ginger, or we'll never reach the park in time to see the girls off. The trailers are to leave just at ten, you know."

The speaker, a slim dark-haired miss of sixteen, indicated with a nod of her well-shaped head, the huge round timepiece in the front window of the Harmon National Bank. The creeping clock hands revealed that it lacked but five minutes of the appointed hour.

"I don't much care if we are late," the other girl rejoined dispiritedly. "It's not my idea of fun to see our friends start on a wonderful vacation while we stay at home."

Ginger Gibson, a year younger than her sister Barbara, was the careless possessor of mischievous blue eyes, unruly flaxen hair, a freckled little pug nose and a happy-go-lucky disposition. But upon this morning in early June her usual gaiety had deserted her. Unwillingly, she quickened her step to keep pace with her sister.

"We're both disappointed, of course," Barbara an-

swered philosophically, "but that's no reason for not accepting the situation with good grace. Uncle Nathan has done so much for us."

"Oh, I didn't mean to suggest that he should have allowed us to go," Ginger interposed quickly. "Uncle Nathan feels worse about it than we do. It was simply a matter of money. Twenty dollars doesn't seem like such a great amount though."

"If we both had gone it would have taken forty dollars, not to count the extra items," Barbara reminded her sister. She added soberly: "You know, I suspect Uncle Nathan is worrying about finances. Only this morning I heard him speak to Mrs. Goodbar about cutting down household expenses."

"And that's not a bit like him. Uncle Nathan has always been so generous. I'd feel like a thief to take a cent from him for a vacation trip."

"It is hard though to see our friends going off without us," Barbara acknowledged.

"Yes, a trip aboard a motor trailer would be such fun. But of course you're right about hiding our disappointment."

Ginger sighed as she contemplated the interesting excursion planned by the twelve tried-and-true members of the Harmon Friendship Club. Under the leadership of popular Miss Howard, physical training teacher at the Harmon High School, the members of the organization had rented two trailers which would

transport them to the Pennsylvania mountains and there provide living quarters during a scheduled two weeks' vacation.

Barbara and Ginger eagerly had looked forward to the adventurous excursion and so were bitterly disappointed when Nathan French, the indulgent uncle with whom they and their thirteen-year-old brother, Jimmie, made their home, regretfully explained that he would be unable to provide the required expense money. The blow had been a particularly severe one since it was the first time in the memory of the Gibson girls that they had been denied a vacation.

"I guess we're not too late after all," Barbara said a few minutes later as the girls came within view of the park.

Through the tall trees, stationed near the west entrance, they glimpsed two gleaming gray streamlined trailers, each attached to its accompanying automobile. Tousled heads were seen protruding from the tiny, curtained windows, while several excited girls were trying to push through the narrow doors into the already crowded interiors.

Barbara and Ginger joined the group and, warmed by the rousing welcome accorded them, were conducted aboard one of the trailers, there to inspect the compact little kitchen, the clever folding tables, the six comfortable beds which could be converted into attractive davenports.

"Oh, it's just like a little dream house!" Ginger declared, her blue eyes shining. "I only wish Barbara and I were going along!"

"It's not too late to change your mind," Miss Howard urged, watching the girls narrowly to observe their reaction. "We still have two empty bunks."

Barbara and Ginger smilingly shook their heads. They were well aware that the other girls were regarding them a trifle sympathetically. Although they had never explained why they were remaining behind, they knew that their chums had not been deceived. Yet they were startled when Miss Howard drew them aside to say quietly:

"The girls all want you to go along. If it's a matter of money, let me pay your share."

"It's good of you to offer," Barbara replied, flushing with embarrassment, "but I'm afraid we can't accept."

"We've had so many splendid vacations in past years, we really shouldn't mind staying at home this one time," Ginger added.

Miss Howard nodded and did not press the matter. Leaving the girls to chat with their friends, she moved away to attend to a few last minute details. All luggage had been loaded aboard the trailers, the tiny kitchenette cupboards were well stocked with tinned goods, and now the girls were clamoring to be off. They took their places in the automobiles, and finally, Miss Howard gave the signal for the drivers to pull away.

"Have a good time!" Ginger called as the trailers moved slowly from the curbing. "Drop us a card now and then!"

For several minutes after the trailers had vanished beyond the first corner, the Gibson girls stood staring down the street. Then resolutely, they shook off their mood of depression. Barbara said with forced cheerfulness:

"Well, that's that and we may as well forget it. Let's be getting back home. We promised Goody we'd help with the cleaning this morning."

"Goody" was the affectionate name which the Gibson children had bestowed upon the family housekeeper, Mrs. Goodbar. It seemed to fit her benevolent and cheerful character so well that sometimes she was called Mrs. Goody even by more casual acquaintances.

Mrs. Goodbar had assumed charge of the French home some five years previous when Barbara, Ginger and Jimmie became wards of their Uncle Nathan. He had sought the most competent and sympathetic woman he could find to manage the household, hoping, in this way, to fill the void left by the untimely death of Mrs. Gibson. The kindly housekeeper loved the children as if they were her own progeny.

"They're a mischievous brood," she would say tolerantly to friends who wondered at her fortitude, "but I'd not trade them for any other three children in the world."

Ten Towers, the picturesque house which was their

home, sprawled haphazardly over a hill at the outskirts of the town. Its ten irregularly spaced miniature towers gave to the whole an appearance of hit-and-miss design not unlike that of a toy castle. The place was a delight to Barbara, Ginger and Jimmie. Each had his own individual tower, fitted up to suit the tenant's fancy.

The room of Jimmie's tower contained a remarkable collection of miscellaneous articles, considered by his sisters to be utterly useless. His special pride and joy was a home made short-wave radio set over which he spent many anxious hours trying to maintain contact with the outside world. There were many circular shelves filled with treasures, not the least of which was the skeleton of a large rattlesnake.

Barbara's tower room was lined with a wealth of books. On a small center table she kept her favorite stories, The Twin Ring Mystery, The Clue at Crooked Lane, and the Hollow Wall Mystery, which she had read so many times she could almost repeat whole pages from memory.

Ginger's tower had scarcely a book in it but was fitted up as a gymnasium of sorts with weights and pulleys in the walls, and an assortment of tennis rackets, bathing suits and athletic shoes scattered helter-skelter in neglected corners.

"Mrs. Goody may think we've forgotten our promise to help her," Barbara remarked as the girls came within

view of Ten Towers. "It must be after eleven o'clock by this time."

Ginger offered no response for her attention had been attracted to a group of men and women who had gathered in front of the French home and were talking excitedly. A strange automobile stood at the curbing.

"It looks to me as if something is wrong," Ginger observed uneasily.

Even as she spoke, she saw her brother, Jimmie, come running from the house. Observing Ginger and Barbara, he hurried to meet them, his sweater coat flapping wildly in the wind. One swift glance at the boy's tense face assured the girls that indeed something was amiss.

"What is it? What has happened, Jimmie?" Barbara questioned, gripping his hand.

"It's Uncle Nathan!" the boy burst out, struggling vainly to control his voice. "He's been hurt in an auto accident!"

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